

Correspondences

Journal for the
Study of Esotericism

Editors

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Contents

Editorial: Time to Drop the “Western” 109

Research Articles

AVERY MORROW. Boundary Work in Japanese Religious Studies: 117
Anesaki Masaharu on Religious Freedom and Academic Concealment

HANS THOMAS HAKL. Deification as a Core Theme in Julius 145
Evola’s Esoteric Works

PETER LANCHIDI. Between Judaism and Freemasonry: The Dual 173
Interpretation of David Rosenberg’s Kabbalistic Lithograph,
Aperçu de l’Origine du Culte Hébraïque (1841)

AARON FRENCH. The Mandela Effect and New Memory 201

Book Reviews

Arthur Versluis. *Platonic Mysticism: Contemplative Science, Philosophy,* 235
Literature, and Art.
Reviewed by NICHOLAS BANNER.

Stephen C. Finley, Margarita Simon Guillory, & 245
Hugh R. Page Jr., (eds.). *Esotericism in African American Religious*
Experience: “There is a Mystery”...
Reviewed by FREDRIK GREGORIUS.

Editorial: Time to Drop the “Western”

Aren Roukema and Allan Kilner-Johnson

Alert readers will have noticed that we have dropped two words from our title: “online” and “Western.” We doubt the first will provoke much discussion—times have changed since the journal was founded in 2012. At that time open-access, online journals were becoming a popular and accepted mode of disseminating academic research, but we still felt the need to clearly illustrate our web-only format. *Correspondences* is now more widely known, and few authors or readers would automatically assume a journal to be print-based, so the clarification seems unnecessary. Even our last few sentences feel like an absolute waste of everyone’s time. Apologies.

Dropping the “Western,” however, seems less likely to achieve immediate consensus approval among our readers, and we would thus like to explain the rationale behind the change. The removal of “Western” from our title is by no means indicative of substantive changes in editorial outlook for *Correspondences*. Moreover, it is not our intention to speak out against its use: *Correspondences* will not dissuade researchers from using the term to clarify their research objects, and we encourage the submission of articles that either take a position in support of “Western esotericism” or investigate phenomena that substantiate the value of the term. However, we feel there is more to be gained than lost from de-emphasising the specific “Western” nature of esotericism. First, we do not think that “Western” traditions, currents, events, figures, and concepts can be separated from whatever is perceived to be the non-Western Other against which the identity of these phenomena is clarified. We find this to be difficult

across all periods of history, but particularly the present. Second, and related to this, the formation of “Western” identity has occurred in the context of political and ideological motivations which we see no reason to perpetuate. Third, while the addition of the “Western” to “esotericism” has been used to successfully clarify the academic methodologies of the field, we argue that as a maturing research field, the study of esoteric phenomena no longer requires an implicit connection between historicist methodology and the denominative “Western.”

We will shortly expand on these points, but first a brief review of the history of the term “Western esotericism” and the debate surrounding its usage. The adjectival Western was appended over the course of the 1990s as scholars attempted to establish a critical research field that eschewed essentialist approaches in which the specific and the particular are seen as mere adumbrations of perennial absolutes underlying existence, rather than historical, cultural, or sociological phenomena in their own right. As Wouter J. Hanegraaff recalls, the change was emblematised in the decision by the editors of *ARIES* to change the journal’s title from a journal of “*l’esoterisme*” to one of “Western esotericism” when relaunched by Brill in 2001.¹ “Western” thus became, as Egil Asprem notes, “a marker of *specificity* rather than...a geographical index term.”² This is not, of course, to say that the term did not have geographical and historical associations, and beginning in the late 2000s scholars including Kennet Granholm and Marco Pasi began to question the relationship between geo-specification and methodology, noting the complex global interrelationship of esoteric traditions, particularly in modernity.³

A full survey of the debate since that point is not practical for an editorial, but a quick review of the discussion that has taken place just in the pages of *Correspondences* is illustrative of remaining problems of definition and continuing lack of consensus in the field. In “Beyond the West: Towards a New Comparativism in the Study of Esotericism,” Egil Asprem emphasises the importance of specific, cultural-historical research, but argues that similarities in how particular traditions have arisen in various geographical

¹ Wouter J. Hanegraaff, “The Globalization of Esotericism,” *Correspondences* 3, no. 1 (2015): 56-57.

² Egil Asprem, “Beyond the West: Towards a New Comparativism in the Study of Esotericism,” *Correspondences* 2, no. 2 (2014): 8.

³ Kennet Granholm, “Locating the West: Problematizing the Western in Western Esotericism and Occultism,” in *Occultism in a Global Perspective*, ed. Henrik Bogdan and Gordan Djurdjevic, 17-36 (London: Acumen, 2013); Marco Pasi, “Oriental Kabbalah and the Parting of East and West in the Early Theosophical Society,” in *Kabbalah and Modernity: Interpretations, Transformations, Adaptations*, ed. Boaz Huss, Marco Pasi and Kocku von Stuckrad, 152-66 (Leiden: Brill, 2010).

loci call for “a comparative study of esotericism on a truly global rather than a narrowly conceived ‘Western’ scale,” echoing Granholm’s 2010 call to dispense with the adjectival Western.⁴ Hanegraaff responds to this in the next issue in “The Globalization of Esotericism,” where he acknowledges the political and ideological problems that stem from the adjectival Western (63), and agrees that “Western esotericism” has become a phenomenon with global implications (86), but maintains the original motivation behind the term, arguing that the adjectival Western remains necessary for “not theoretical but *methodological*” reasons, helping to ensure specificity over essentialism (80–83). In their introduction to the recent special issue on “Ethnographies of the Esoteric,” Susannah Crockford and Asprem recognise the theoretical limitations faced by a field of academic study rooted principally, although by no means exclusively, in historiographic methods which have often privileged Eurocentric notions of “rationality.”⁵ That the modern academy itself found both its roots and its sustenance in the rationalist discourse of modernity suggests the possibility of a sort of ouroboros of deconstruction committed to its own deconstruction; however, as the articles in this special issue demonstrate, the expansion of the methodological palate (in this case, with the reflexive subject positioning offered by ethnography) has the ability to open up rather than close down productive lines of scholarly debate. Questions of both cultural and methodological boundaries similarly arise in the present issue. In his consideration of expressions of deification in the work of Julius Evola, Hans Thomas Hakl suggests that a historicist approach is not always able to highlight the most interesting questions raised by esoteric philosophy. Avery Morrow turns to Thomas Gieryn’s notion of “boundary-work” to point out that a culturally situated definition of “esotericism” is materially problematic in Japanese religious studies. A forthcoming special issue will continue to examine such questions through a focus on Islam and esotericism.

Even though work such as this has continued to investigate the boundaries of discipline, culture, and history, its very presence in the academic arena (not to mention the presence of *Correspondences*) is unquestionably dependent upon the hard-won credibility of the field known as “Western esotericism.”

⁴ Granholm, “Locating the West,” 31: “Until we can operationalize and qualify the term ‘Western’, and I do not believe that we ever will—nor should for that matter—we should forgo the use of it in the central role it has in the field today.”

⁵ Susannah Crockford and Egil Asprem, “Ethnographies of the Esoteric: Introducing Anthropological Methods and Theories to the Study of Contemporary Esotericism,” *Correspondences* 6, no. 1 (2018).

There is no denying that the field which this phrase describes offers a sound academic infrastructure to topics and contexts that would have, only a few decades ago, been treated with distrust or utter disregard. As José van Dijck explains in his preface to *Hermes in the Academy: Ten Years' Study of Western Esotericism at the University of Amsterdam*,

By the end of the 1990s, that term [Western esotericism] still caused some eyebrows to be raised. It was not yet so clear to everybody that, far from being a synonym for New Age, the label 'Western esotericism' covered a wide range of important and influential currents in intellectual history from the Renaissance to the present, with roots in Late Antiquity.⁶

The “Westernisation” of Western esotericism has represented, perhaps, a process of what postcolonial theorist Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak would call “strategic essentialism,” the manufacture of a collective subjectivity until such time as the individual voice has gained full recognition and expression. Foundational scholars including Antoine Faivre, Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke, and Hanegraaff defined a tradition of Western esoteric thought through a recombinatory lineage of heterodox perspectives. The denominative Western performs a useful function in delimiting the historical and conceptual bounds of a field of study that has indeed been focused largely on phenomena either produced or interpreted/adapted within a “Western” political and cultural sphere. Many of our current understandings are based on historical and discursive currents that took place within European or North American intellectual or religious history, currents that can certainly be called “Western.” This framing of Western esotericism as a panoply of nested traditions, influences, and forms which run alongside established historical lines has been key to its recognition and growth.

Yet, in denominating a specifically “Western” esotericism, we risk more being lost than gained. We have no wish to override the very real historical processes that have taken place in the West to develop our very categories of “esotericism” and “occultism”, as Hanegraaff has identified.⁷ However, designed to avoid essentialism, the “Western” often confronts researchers on the geographical and cultural margins with a constructed rigidity that creates

⁶ José van Dijck, Preface to *Hermes in the Academy: Ten Years' Study of Western Esotericism at the University of Amsterdam*, ed. Wouter Hanegraaff and Joyce Pijnenburg, 7-8 (Amsterdam: University of Amsterdam Press, 2009).

⁷ Wouter J. Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy: Rejected Knowledge in Western Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012). For a quick summary see “Globalization of Esotericism,” 64-70.

problems of classification and comparison: How do we deal with phenomena that emerge outside of a geographically Western context, yet seem somehow related, whether analogically or because of actual cultural influence? Do we include or exclude religious movements and practices clearly influenced by groups/traditions we would otherwise include under the banner of Western esotericism? From the allegorical wanderings of Christian Rosenkreutz to the apocryphal journeys of G.I. Gurdjieff—not to mention the innumerable interfaces and exchanges that brought alchemy, astrology, and ceremonial magic into Europe—the very notion of “Western esotericism” has always implied the presence of its often Orientalised Other, and, in many cases, has depended upon that Other for both its substance and validation. In this regard, Western esotericism provides a curiously resonant counterpoint to contemporary postcolonial critical and cultural theory: here is a tradition that knowingly resists its own centre and frames itself as an outsider among outsiders. “Western” is an adjective that requires an opposite—Northern or Southern perhaps, but primarily “Eastern.” This requirement initially seems geographical, and the historicist current in the field of Western esotericism would have us believe that it is an extension of historical realities, but the requirement for opposition is almost entirely linguistic. The other, “Eastern” pole of this dichotomy is even more poorly conceptualised, constructed by largely polemical processes of Orientalisation, as Edward Said has famously shown. It is very difficult to conceptualise any consistent set of descriptors or criteria by which a person, place, or thing might be identified as Eastern, apart from, if one falls into a trap of denomination, everything that is “non-Western.” The West–East binary thus reflects a long history of xenophobia and exploitation that remains a catalyst for socio-political tensions today, which emerge from groups and discourses of which *Correspondences* wants no part. It is, moreover, poorly equipped to grapple with and contain the complex global interchange of ideas in the esoteric traditions, particularly in the last two hundred years.

The actuality of global integration and the problematic ideological associations of the term “Western” do not mean it should be ignored entirely. The West–East binary has important roots in the perception of self and society developed by Europeans and European-influenced colonial regions, and thus remains crucial to understanding the cultures of these regions. This opposition should, however, be a research object, not the justification for a methodology. The same holds true, as Granholm has argued, for the use of “Western” in esotericism. Granholm argues the opposite of the historicist justification for the adjectival Western. He notes that esoteric thinkers have

tended to “adopt romanticized views” of the “non-Western” other. “The prominence of this romanticizing tendency, combined with the near impossibility to demarcate ‘the West’ from the ‘non-West’ in any conclusive and satisfactory manner, suggests that ‘Western’ is best approached as an internal, emic, category in esoteric discourse.”⁸ Ceasing to delimit esotericism according to a Western pole of an artificial cultural structure would thus allow scholars of esotericism to come closer in perspective to their research subjects, many of whom see esoteric knowledge as perennial and universal and thus, by definition, global (if not inter-galactic).

Yet this, of course, is the very research perspective that the adjectival Western was introduced to prevent, as scholars like Hanegraaff and Faivre attempted, positively in our view, to disassociate the academic study of esotericism from religionist and essentialist approaches.⁹ *Correspondences* remains committed to the project inaugurated by these scholars. While we value the perennialist and religionist perspectives of practitioners of all sorts, we have dedicated this journal to skeptical, facts-based research that insists on drawing out historical, cultural, intellectual, conceptual, and sociological specificity as much as it values drawing comparisons between like and unlike traditions. We believe that quality, sustained research of any kind will expose as much difference as it will reveal similarity. We question, however, a key assumption which has been perpetuated by the historicist deployment of what Asprey calls the “negative heuristic” of the adjectival Western. Why must there be an essential relationship between locality and “religionist” or “essentialist” approaches to esoteric phenomena? Can we not resist such methodologies in our research processes without restricting ourselves via the constructed East-West binary? The adjectival Western may have served a purpose in the *historically situated* clash between essentialism and historical specificity, but we do not believe that it must *essentially* do so now. While we readily acknowledge that esotericism can be historically described as a largely Western (if we must use the term) phenomenon, we are not willing to close off opportunities for beneficial discoveries and discussion that may result from comparing traditions with different cultural and locational heritages.

Dropping the “Western” does not excise the Western. The name change is not meant to shift focus but to enlarge it where necessary, avoiding troubling discussions such as those surrounding whether Jewish and Islamic

⁸ Granholm, “Locating the West,” 17.

⁹ For Hanegraaff’s critique of such approaches, see *Esotericism and the Academy*, 277-314.

esotericisms are worthy of study using the paradigms, discursive strategies and methodologies that have been developed in the field. Our intention is to encourage more open, critically engaged research, *not* to create a free-for-all scenario in which research paradigms, methodologies, previously acquired knowledge, and previously achieved consensus are discarded. We hope that the less specific term will allow room for other esotericisms developed outside of, or alongside of, specific Western intellectual currents. This could include heterogeneous phenomena formed on the margins of what is considered Western, hybrid traditions developed in dialogue with Western culture, and yes, phenomena developed outside of the Western context that nevertheless have indicative analogical points of comparison that really can't be ignored. The title change aims to acknowledge the changing contours of the academic study of esotericism, thus fulfilling the mandate of an academic journal to record the state of the field rather than impose its own *Weltanschauung*.

Boundary Work in Japanese Religious Studies: Anesaki Masaharu on Religious Freedom and Academic Concealment

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Abstract

Past issues of *Correspondences* have sought to envision non-Western “esoteric” categories, but it remains an open question as to whether esotericism is a generic mode of thought, as opposed to a construction within intellectual history. I demonstrate some difficulties with identifying an esoteric category in modern Japanese culture, suggesting that the problem is one of discursive boundaries within the humanities. Accordingly, I examine boundary work by one of Japan’s founding religious scholars. It appears that Anesaki Masaharu engaged in two types of boundary-making: disputation of the type of authority being used by religious groups, and criticism of concealment within the academic context. Comparing the latter behavior to Western esotericism, I find that it matches up most closely to a different concept of esotericism than that commonly used in this field.

Keywords

Global esotericism; disenchantment of the world; Japanese religion; critical religion; Oomoto movement

Introduction

As is typical in the human sciences, a consensus definition of “esotericism” has proven increasingly elusive as the value of the term is debated. What was once seen as a single category of “Western esotericism” is now being split into separate research programs, two of which are especially visible. One camp considers esotericism to be a term constructed and bounded by “strictly historical” origins, linked to other historical constructs such as “science,” “religion,” and “the West.” The other considers esotericism to be a description of a generic kind of thought, which may guide comparative projects.¹

Within the pages of *Correspondences*, a representative of the historicist camp has been Wouter Hanegraaff, who writes that “it would be yet another form of terminological imperialism if we now tried to project this terminology on to the rest of the world.”² In the comparative camp we may place Egil Asprem, who observes a “suspicion against cross-cultural comparative research,” and imagines the history of thought as a kind of cognitive tree of life, where esotericism may or may not represent a “convergent cultural evolution” towards specific, identifiable kinds of thinking such as correspondence and imagination. In Asprem’s opinion, the “Western” boundaries of esoteric studies are too stringent and privilege historicism at the expense of “sociological, psychological, cognitive” and other viable research programs.³

While Asprem is an advocate of cognitive science, his desire to broaden the definition of esotericism is not for the sake of cognitive science alone, but for all kinds of “reflexive modernization”: the desire to reanalyze existing theories of modernity, improve their accuracy, and thereby draw helpful sociological conclusions. Such research may include historical analyses of the modernization process, but it is not defined by historicism.⁴ Hanegraaff, in contrast, emphasizes historicism, not to affirm the “truth of history” (nor the “truth of modernity”) but to emphasize the theological and specific nature of how esotericism was constructed as a category, and to avoid heresy-hunting within objective humanities research.⁵

¹ Julian Strube, “Transgressing Boundaries: Social Reform, Theology, and the Demarcations between Science and Religion,” *Aries* 16 (2016), 1–3, 6–7; Egil Asprem, “Beyond the West: Towards a New Comparativism in the Study of Esotericism,” *Correspondences* 2, no. 1 (2014): 5.

² Wouter J. Hanegraaff, “The Globalization of Esotericism,” *Correspondences* 3 (2015): 86

³ Asprem, “Beyond the West,” 15, 29, 19.

⁴ Asprem, *The Problem of Disenchantment* (Brill, 2014), 554–57; Ulrich Beck, Anthony Giddens, and Scott Lash, *Reflexive Modernization* (Stanford University Press, 1994).

⁵ Hanegraaff, “Globalization,” 84ff, and *Western Esotericism: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 144–45.

There is much at stake, therefore, in the existence or non-existence of non-Western esotericism. If the term *esotericism* can be shown to also characterize some kinds of non-Western thought, then the reflexive modernization that rigorously identifies esotericism is also basic and universally applicable, and its historical forms serve mainly as case studies. If esotericism is specific to the West, on the other hand, then the overarching category is subsumed into historical analysis, and we may reasonably conceive of present-day societies that lack an equivalent concept.

Recent Japanese-language research on the emergence of naturalism, secularism, and academism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries presents us with a non-Western country that has engaged in a particularly good quality of reflexive research. In the first sections of this paper, I will show that while secret practices were rationalized and local cosmologies relativized in Japan, intellectuals did not imagine this as a “disenchantment of the world.”

Building on this literature review, I will attempt to theorize “non-Western esotericism” through a specific case study in Japan. I will show that when a claim to hidden knowledge aroused much popular interest and elite support in Japan, the religious scholar Anesaki Masaharu (1873–1949) was moved to debunk it, but the idea that valuable knowledge can be hidden (or, that hidden knowledge can be valuable) was not central to his critique. Instead, he engaged with this idea in a more specific context, suggesting that it was an act of “boundary work” on his part.

Western Esotericism, Disenchantment, and Japanese Discourse

As part of their methodological projects, both Asprem and Hanegraaff sometimes use “esoteric” simply to mean secret ritual, with “esotericism” being the accompanying tendency towards secrecy or “sociology of secrecy.”⁶ Certainly, the practice of secrecy encourages participants to think of information and its purveyors as privileged and can be used to reinforce trust and authority in various circumstances, including businesses, intelligence agencies, and religious groups.⁷ The real question of whether “esotericism” is a universally valid concept, though, is grounded in whether ritual secrecy comes out of a desire to indicate higher knowledge. Kocku von Stuckrad indicates that because “the dialectic of concealment and revelation is a structural element of secretive discourses,” secrecy should imply “the *claim* to a wisdom that is superior to

⁶ Asprem, “Beyond the West,” 16; Hanegraaff, “Esotericism Theorized: Major Trends and Approaches to the Study of Esotericism,” in *Religion: Secret Religion* (Farmington Hills, MI: Macmillan, 2016), 155–70.

⁷ David William Mac Gillavry, “Rethinking Secrecy in Religion: Cognition and the Intimacy of Secrecy,” *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* 30, no. 4–5 (2018): 301–20.

other interpretations of cosmos and history,” in a possibly universal sense.⁸

Secrecy is used in many aspects of modern Japanese ritual. For example, in Shingon Buddhism, the inner meanings of rituals are not revealed to the public. There are also “esoteric” mystery cults in the ancient Greek sense, such as one conducted by Shinto priests on the island of Okinoshima, where participants are forbidden from speaking about what they have witnessed. There is an “esoteric” aspect to some household rites, notably the rituals of the imperial household, which are kept formally private to avoid the accusation that government funds are being spent on religious activities.⁹ Medieval Japanese manuscripts refer to “secret transmissions” about a number of topics such as poetry collections, music, and artisanry. In some instances, these transmissions continue today.¹⁰

Over the course of the seventeenth to the nineteenth century, a discourse of rationalization developed that eliminated many secret teachings. The concept of the secret itself, however, was not erased but reconfigured to match new expectations surrounding public access. During Japan’s rapid Westernization, one school of tea ceremony publicized its formerly secret teachings, but the stated objective of this was to propagate the ceremony and the wordless “true secrets” of its bodily movements more rapidly, not to deny the value of personal transmission.¹¹ Meanwhile, *new* practices of concealment were developed that shrouded the glory of the shogun and (later) the emperor in mystification, culminating in the 1930s purge of intellectuals who attempted to “rationalize” the role of the emperor.¹²

Let us see how this compares to the attempt to universalize “esotericism.” In Asprem’s attempt to disassemble Western esotericism for cognitive analysis, he proposes that “our theoretical ambition must be to explain why we see this clustering of” elements such as heterodoxy, “‘secrecy,’ and claims to ‘absolute knowledge,’” not from a historical perspective of the motivations of past researchers, but from a “bottom-up” perspective of how a concept such as es-

⁸ Kocku von Stuckrad, “Western Esotericism: Towards an Integrative Model of Interpretation,” *Religion* 35 (2005), 88–89; Asprem, “Beyond the West,” 17.

⁹ I thank Kondō Mitsuhiro for providing me with this final example. Further examples and analysis can be found in *The Culture of Secrecy in Japanese Religion*, ed. Bernhard Scheid and Mark Teeuwen (London: Routledge, 2006), especially chs. 13–15.

¹⁰ Fabio Rambelli, “Secrecy in Japanese Esoteric Buddhism,” in Scheid and Teeuwen, *Culture of Secrecy*, 121–22; and Maki Isaka Morinaga, *Secrecy in Japanese Arts: “Secret Transmission” as a Mode of Knowledge* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).

¹¹ Kumakura Isao, *Kindai sadō shi* (Tokyo: NHK, 1980), 184; Tanaka Hidetaka, *Kindai chadō no rekishi shakaigaku* (Kyoto: Shibunkaku Shuppan, 2007), 359.

¹² John S. Brownlee, *Japanese Historians and the National Myths, 1600–1945: The Age of the Gods and Emperor Jimmu* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1999), chs. 5–13, esp. 134ff.

otericism relates to a generic human's "information processing". "Esotericism" could be a function of individual modes of perception such as "schizotypy," which "detect[s] patterns in ambiguous information or random noise."¹³

This seems to rely on a desire for secret practice coming out of individual inclination, rather than institutional authority. The institutionalization of modes of thought that are seen in the West as personal inclinations towards esotericism damages the case for non-Western esotericism significantly — unless we are to conclude that entire foreign cultures exhibit more "schizotypy" than the West at an institutional level, a line of thought which would take us down a dangerous road. Furthermore, there is by no means a "clustering" with "heterodoxy" or "claims to 'absolute knowledge'" in the traditions of secrecy that remain in modern Japan. While some of the secret transmissions in Japan were historically "heterodox," it is hard to think of anything more *orthodox* to Japanese ritual practice than the Imperial household ritual, which has continued almost uninterrupted for over 1200 years.

Where did such "clustering" come from in the West? Asprem writes that a centuries-long process of "intellectualisation and rationalisation" gave rise to a "problem of disenchantment" perceived at the end of the nineteenth century. An earlier theological concern with *gnosis*, access to higher or perfect knowledge, was subsumed into an "expansion of reason" beyond mainstream scientific understanding. Hence "a specific theological context" produced an understanding of disenchantment, reason, and science, which gave rise to culturally specific applications of what he believes to be a more general concept of esotericism.¹⁴

Japan does not have any referent for the theological problem of gnosis. Japanese Buddhists relying on the Yogācāra school have their own concept of perfect knowledge — but this is knowledge of *emptiness* (*śūnyatā*), not of divine content, so no words or actions can circumscribe it.¹⁵ Another influential Buddhist philosophy in Japan has been *prajñāpāramitā* literature, where the Buddha relies on language as an expedient means (*upāya*) meant to be discarded when it achieves its goals: not providing access to truth in itself, but as a means to reveal the shortcomings of language.¹⁶ The concept of gnosis remains unfamiliar and unintuitive in Japan today.

¹³ Asprem, "Reverse-engineering 'Esotericism': How to Prepare a Complex Cultural Concept for the Cognitive Science of Religion," *Religion* 46, no. 2 (2016): 158-85.

¹⁴ Asprem, *Problem of Disenchantment*, 431-441, 541-546.

¹⁵ Fabio Rambelli, *A Buddhist Theory of Semiotics* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 19.

¹⁶ Dilip Loundo, "The 'Two Truths' Doctrine (*satyadruya*) and the Nature of *upāya* in Nāgārjuna," *Kriterion: Revista de Filosofia* 57, no. 133 (2016): 17-41; Steve Oden, "Derrida and the Decentered Universe of Chan/Zen Buddhism," *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 17 (1990): 61-86. The difference between *prajñā* and gnosis has long been recognized: "la Prajnā n'est pas une gnose, l'aperception d'une réalité transcendante." Louis de la Vallée Poussin, *La Morale bouddhique* (Paris: Nouvelle librairie nationale, 1927), 102.

Here it is worth noting that Izutsu Toshihiko (1914–1993), a Japanese scholar of Islam who became familiar with Western esoteric epistemological claims through the Eranos conference, ended up referring to the collective production of linguistic meaning not as a pointer to gnosis but as “linguistic storehouse consciousness” (*gen-go-araya-shikō*), from the Buddhist term *ālaya-vijñāna*. This refers to the deepest *impediment* to enlightenment: the mind’s attempt to circumscribe the unnamable ultimate in human language.

Attempting to locate “the problem of disenchantment” in Japan is similarly fraught with difficulties. As Jason Josephson-Storm has recently shown, the phrase “disenchantment of the world” as used by Max Weber is a highly romantic myth, essentially invoking European legends of a lost world of “enchantment.”¹⁷ This romanticism has no referent in Japanese, and Weber’s idea of disenchantment was mostly ignored in Japan’s prewar period.¹⁸ After World War II, Japanese left-theorists frequently mistranslated it as “liberation from bewitchment” (*jujutsu kara no kaibō*), consistently mistaking it for a simple call to build an irreligious society.¹⁹ It is only recently that more careful Japanese scholars have recognized Weber’s “ambivalence,” observing that Weber is implicitly referring back to Friedrich Schiller’s conceptualization of “the disenchantment of the world” as a loss of cultural innocence.²⁰

The basis for cross-cultural comparison is thus hindered significantly, as the key ideas of “enchantment” and “gnosis” are missing from the Japanese context. However, as Josephson-Storm quite helpfully points out, it is not at all the case that the West is “disenchanted” in the terms of being free of superstition or religion. Self-description of religious belief is not strikingly different in Japan versus the West. Rather, Weber’s “disenchantment” is meant to implicate the modern intellectual, or even more narrowly the humanities scholar, who is fated by an unknown god of disenchantment to perpetrate erudite works of methodological agnosticism or naturalism on the world.²¹

This coincides nicely with Hanegraaff’s historicist approach to the definition of esotericism, in which it is defined by Western philosophical trends that render

¹⁷ Jason A. Josephson-Storm, *The Myth of Disenchantment* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 127ff.

¹⁸ In his survey of Western esotericism, Tsuruoka Yoshio makes a wise choice to use the Latin term *magia* to describe the target of disenchanting narratives, instead of any Japanese term. See “‘Jujutsu’ no miryoku: ‘eien no alternative’ no raireki to kanōsei ni tsuite no shiron,” in *“Jujutsu” no jubaku*, ed. Egawa Jun’ichi and Kubota Hiroshi, vol. 2 (Tokyo: Lithon, 2017), 85–118.

¹⁹ Nakamura Yūjirō, *Nakamura Yūjirō chosakushū dai 2-ki*, vol. 8 (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 2001), 220.

²⁰ Mita Munesuke, *Shakaigaku nyūmon* (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 2006), 62–67. For more on Schiller see Josephson-Storm, *Myth of Disenchantment*, 80ff.

²¹ Josephson-Storm, *Myth of Disenchantment*, 22–40 and 313–4.

some specific types of thought undesirable *in the academy*.²² Following the arguments of both Hanegraaff and Josephson-Storm, the lack of a “disenchantment” narrative does not point to the nation of Japan being trapped in some Oriental mystification, but rather that the push towards naturalism caused different sorts of problems to arise within Japanese intellectual institutions.

This should compel us to consider the problem of searching for esotericism in Japan from a different perspective. Rather than a popular movement corresponding to a collective disenchantment or search for gnosis, we should be asking ourselves what sort of problems Japanese intellectuals were dealing with at this time, and the boundaries that were set for possible solutions. We can then see how questions of secrecy and concealment arise in this context.

The Impetus for Boundary Work in Japanese Religious Studies

Shimazono Susumu, former senior professor of religious studies at the University of Tokyo and dean of religious studies in Japan, has argued that in place of the Protestant ethic that Weber identified in the early modern West, Japanese capitalism was given its structure during that period by a mercantile “popular morality” or “teaching of the heart” that has been thoroughly described by Robert Bellah and Yasumaru Yoshio. Shimazono describes Yasumaru’s work as “a corrective of the Weberian view of the nature of the popular ethical reform that supported modernization,” emphasizing that it does not require anything like a denial of magic. He offers some examples of the positive contributions of new religions to the growth of modern democracy, suggesting that nothing like a dialectic of “disenchantment” was necessary in Japan. Rather, the Westernization process involved a different and equally complex kind of local boundary work.²³

As Japanese authorities resolved to compete with Western powers following the Meiji Restoration of 1868, responses to the new political reality ran the full gamut, from Mori Arinori (1847-1889), who suggested that Japan should convert to Christianity and make English the national language, to more obscure writers like Taoka Reiun (1879-1912) and Kaiseki Sata (1818-1882), who aired suspicions of all things Western as spiritually deadening or geopolitically dangerous. Beneath their differences, though, all these writers shared a common

²² Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 3.

²³ Shimazono Susumu, *From Salvation to Spirituality: Popular Religious Movements in Modern Japan* (Melbourne: Trans Pacific, 2004), 43, referring to Robert Bellah, *Tokugawa Religion* (Chicago: The Free Press, 1957), and Yasumaru Yoshio, *Nibon no kindaiika to minshu shiso* (Tokyo: Aoki Shoten, 1974).

understanding that Japan was encountering a new and massive kind of foreignness.

As writers like Yasumaru and Sakai Naoki have pointed out, the arrival of the Western philosophical ideal irrevocably relativized Japan's self-perception, geographically and culturally.²⁴ It was no longer possible for the worldview of previous centuries, with its sinosphere Heaven and Earth, Buddhas, gods, and monsters, to be accepted as universal. The pre-Meiji worldview was now known to be a "pre-modern" "Japanese" production and was forced to stand in contrast to the mechanized worldview produced by "modern" Western knowledge. Hence when the great Westernizer Fukuzawa Yukichi (1835-1901) proclaimed in the 1870s that "it is said that Heaven does not create one person above or below another," Yasumaru notes that he is using the term "Heaven" in a completely "utilitarian and situational" sense. Rather than representing a direct threat to the universal applicability of Western philosophy as Christian theology would, pre-Meiji Japanese concepts such as Heaven were now recognized as culturally relative and could be played with lightly.²⁵

Around the turn of the twentieth century, the pragmatist rhetoric of the Westernizers and other *lumières* was displaced by a new concern with moral and cultural cultivation (*shūyō*) to create ideal citizens. The discourse on cultivation constructed religion in a somewhat dialectical way, imagining it as a historical process that could be sublimated and improved upon to create a new kind of public space.²⁶ Rather than a "problem of disenchantment," then, early twentieth-century Japanese intellectual life was occupied with a problem of cultivation impeding the establishment of a secular, pluralistic public.

One notable problem in the attempt to balance cultivation and secularity was how religion would be taught. Ejima Naotoshi's research finds that a 1903 law permitted schools to teach religions (both Buddhist and non-Buddhist) only as an object of cultural study, not from the standpoint of encouraging faith.²⁷ As the sociologist Thomas Gieryn has argued, portraying religion and science as two ideas in competition for "professional authority and resources" has been common among Western scholars as well. Removing some behaviors

²⁴ Sakai Naoki, *Nibon shiso to in mondai: bon'yaku to shutai* (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1997), 47-8.

²⁵ Fukuzawa Yukichi, "An Encouragement of Learning (*Gakumon no susume*)," trans. William T. de Bary, in *Sources of East Asian Tradition*, vol. 2 (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 521; Yasumaru, *Yasumaru Yoshio shū*, vol. 3 (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 2013), 322. Unless otherwise stated, all translations from Japanese language sources are my own.

²⁶ Kurita Hidehiko, "The Notion of Shūyō and Conceptualizing the Future of Religion at the Turn of the Twentieth Century," *Religious Studies in Japan* 4 (2018): 65-90.

²⁷ Ejima Naotoshi, "Naze daigaku de shūkyō ga manaberu no ka: Meiji-ki no kyōiku seisaku to shūkyōkei senmon gakkō seisei no katei kara," *Shūkyō kenkyū* 88, no. 3 (2014), 68.

from the sphere of acceptable educational methods, and insisting that they are instead objects of study, benefits some programs at the expense of others.²⁸

This sort of “boundary work,” to use Gieryn’s term, permitted the establishment of secular religious studies in Japan, but it also silently built up another boundary, which separated officially permitted “religions” from objectionable behaviors such as “superstition,” “deviant religion,” “pseudo-religion,” and so on. Late nineteenth-century Japan was characterized by intense campaigns by modernizing elites against “superstitious” practices such as fortune-telling and possession. In 1908, it was made a criminal offense to read fortunes “without authority.”²⁹ As those words “without authority” imply, these campaigns were not strictly based in materialism: one religious leader was accused by a heresy-debunking newspaper of being possessed, not by a mighty deity as she claimed, but by a lowly fox.³⁰ As Josephson-Storm observes, these crackdowns were often about “authority” in the simplest sense of the word, as the spiritual authority of local religious leaders posed a threat to secular government.³¹

The concept of religious freedom, which delimited some institutions and specialists as free to operate in a private, religious sphere, and the accompanying concept of unacceptable “superstition” were conceived with a careful eye to protecting the overriding interests of the state. However, there was notable resistance against the desire to crack down on “superstition” and other forces from two intellectual directions: the desire to preserve cultural heritage on one hand, and freedom of religious belief on the other. Gerald Figal has already written extensively about how Yanagita Kunio (1875–1962) attempted to rescue “folklore” from the perception of backwards or meaningless superstition.³²

Where debunking of “superstition” in the West was often linked to a discourse of religion-state separation, attacks on “superstition” in Japan often came from writers with a background in Jōdo Shinshū (True Pure Land/Shin Buddhism),³³

²⁸ Thomas Gieryn, “Boundary-Work and the Demarcation of Science from Non-Science: Strains and Interests in Professional Ideologies of Scientists,” *American Sociological Review* 48, no. 6 (1983): 781–795.

²⁹ Gerald Figal, *Civilization and Monsters: Spirits of Modernity in Meiji Japan* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999), 199; Jason A. Josephson, *The Invention of Religion in Japan* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 164–190.

³⁰ Inoue Nobutaka, *Japanese New Religions in the Age of Mass Media* (Tokyo: Kokugakuin University Institute for Japanese Culture and Classics, 2017), 36. On the reality of fox possession, the newspaper tried to have it both ways. See Nagaoka Takashi, *Shinshukyo to soryokusen: kyōso igo o ikiru* (Nagoya: Nagoya Daigaku Shuppankai, 2015), 76.

³¹ Josephson, *The Invention of Religion in Japan*, 176.

³² Figal, *Civilization and Monsters*, 77–104.

³³ Josephson, “When Buddhism Became a ‘Religion’: Religion and Superstition in the Writings

while, for example, the Nihon Shinrei Gakkai (Japan Spiritualist Association) had nearly all its local branches at Jōdoshū (Pure Land) temples.³⁴ The discourse over the boundaries of knowledge in Meiji Japanese society seems to have involved an unspoken rivalry between different sects of traditional Buddhism.

Amid this fierce debate, Japanese intellectuals turned to the young discipline of religious studies to determine how more “objective” boundaries could be drawn between religion and non-religious delusion. The most prominent figure at the time was the pioneer religious scholar Anesaki Masaharu, a direct disciple of Max Müller who inherited Müller’s entire library. As we will see, Anesaki believed that properly practiced religion was the basis of emotional maturity and morality, making it necessary to reject religious-seeming behaviors that lacked such maturity as “pseudo-religion” or “superstition.”

In the political situation in which Anesaki worked, his choice of boundaries would have been considered uncontroversial. However, considering his social position as a Western-educated humanities scholar attempting to guarantee religious freedom and build the newborn discipline of *Religionswissenschaft*, the way he defends his choices is quite interesting. What I hope to understand through a closer analysis of his writings is why a criticism of hidden knowledge was *not* employed, despite the very prevalent use of hidden knowledge in the religious group in question, and why other types of boundary work were more appropriate for the needs of Japanese society at the time.

The Oomoto Movement and its Controversies

In 1920, Anesaki, then professor of religious studies at the University of Tokyo, contributed an article to a special issue of an academic journal called *Hentai Shinri (Abnormal Psychology)*. This journal was founded to discuss the “psychic” science of psychology, in opposition to “materialist” medicine. It openly affirmed the value of “psychic” healing (mind cures), the sort of mid-1910s scientific development that had drawn some intellectuals to a new religious movement called Oomoto. But in 1920, its editors and various contributors published a special issue that carried various criticisms of Oomoto, which had grown tremendously popular, but had fallen under suspicion of

of Inoue Enryō.” *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 33, no. 1 (2006), 163. See also Yasumaru, *Yasumaru Yōshio shū*, vol. 3, 315ff on the role of Jōdo Shinshū in the development of Japan’s capitalist ethic.

³⁴ This topic is currently being researched by Kurita Hidehiko and Ichiyanagi Hiroataka.

preaching revolution in an oblique, somewhat vague, or hidden manner.³⁵

Oomoto had its origins in the personal religious experiences of an unemployed widow named Deguchi Nao (1837-1918). Nao, who lived in poverty and had no social status to speak of, was an extremely pious woman who regularly visited temples and shrines and had occasionally shown fervent behavior such as automatic writing, although she was illiterate. After two of her daughters went insane and one was imprisoned by her husband, Nao was subjected to multiple psychic “attacks” beginning in early 1892, which caused her to be possessed by various spirits. She was deemed mentally ill by her village and temporarily incarcerated; after her release, she began producing automatic writing which she claimed to be direct revelations from a powerful divinity named Ushitora no Konjin, foretelling the collapse of the modern world of scholarship and greed into an age of darkness, after which Konjin would come to rule the world. Nao eventually attracted the attention of a wandering spiritualist, whom she adopted into her family and renamed Deguchi Onisaburō (1871-1948).³⁶

Onisaburō had a number of complex ideas for promoting Oomoto. He formulated a doctrine that was a mixture of Eastern and Western borrowings as well as his own inventions. Eventually, he hit upon a forgotten Shinto technique called *chinkon-kishin*, which induced spirit possession. Many Japanese people, especially military men and curiosity seekers, came to Oomoto headquarters in rural Kyoto to try this technique for themselves, and it had a rather high rate of success, causing many ordinary visitors to be seized by animal spirits and deities. Dozens of people enjoyed this experience every day, causing stresses within the group as well as criticism and censure from scientific and government authorities.³⁷

The contributors to *Hentai Shinri* in 1920 were generally alarmed by the teachings and practices of Oomoto. Many of them, including the journal’s editor Nakamura Kokyō (1881-1952), hailed from the New Buddhist Movement, which was founded to fight “superstition.”³⁸ They claimed that no spirits were being called in *chinkon-kishin*, but the phenomenon was only a

³⁵ Hyōdō Akiko, “Taishō-ki no ‘seishin’ gainen: Ōmotokyō to *Hentai shinri* no sōkoku o tsūjite,” *Shūkyō kenkyū* 79, no. 1 (2005): 97-120.

³⁶ See my chapter “The Power of Writing in Deguchi Nao’s Ofudesaki,” in *Female Leaders in New Religious Movements*, ed. Inga Bårdsen Tøllefsen and Christian Giudice (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 165-188.

³⁷ Nancy K. Stalker, *Prophet Motive: Deguchi Onisaburō, Oomoto, and the Rise of New Religions in Imperial Japan* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2008), 89-97; Birgit Staemmler, *Chinkon kishin: Mediated Spirit Possession in Japanese New Religions* (Münster: LIT Verlag, 2009), 229-230.

³⁸ Sone Hiroyoshi, “Nakamura Kokyō to ‘Shin Bukkyō,’” in “*Hentai shinri*” to *Nakamura Kōkyō* (Tokyo: Fuji Shuppan, 2001), 176ff.

culturally bound form of hypnotism. They accused the participants of making a cognitive mistake, believing that beings were descending into them, when in fact the appearance of possession was a product of their own “subconscious.”³⁹

In contrast to the rest of the special issue, Anesaki’s article sharply opposed the psychoanalysis of Oomoto believers, saying that even if Oomoto’s thought was “delusion,” it was only an “exaggeration” of the real “ideas of a portion (or a majority) of citizens.”⁴⁰ Anesaki stressed that he was not at all in favor of Oomoto, but as we will see, he believed that there was nothing wrong with participation in religion and the supernatural, and that indeed acknowledging the spiritual was necessary in a healthy society. His critique of Oomoto would therefore have to find different grounds.

Oomoto as “Exoteric” Misuse of National Authority

Instead of identifying Oomoto as inappropriate for the modern age as a typical “modernizer” might have done, Anesaki proposes that it is a craze “suitable for the times.” This phrase repeats itself throughout his argument as he adds more and more evidence that the problem with Oomoto is not about Oomoto itself, but about failures in contemporary Japanese society that drew people to it. Anesaki regrets that some of his own religious studies students have tried out *chinkon-kishin* and converted to Oomoto, dubbing them spiritually weak “pilgrims of superstition” who hop feverishly from one experiment to the next “like a repeat offender.” He argues that an imperfectly liberal society, like the Japan of 1920, will naturally engender fervent beliefs in those seeking spiritual freedom and truth. Therefore, “rather than being an issue of personal psychology, this is an issue of social psychology.”⁴¹

Onisaburō attracted followers to Oomoto by revising Nao’s teaching that Japan would vanquish Western learning with the power of *kami* (divinity). He promised a “restoration” of imperial authority soon to arrive in 1921, which would be on scale with the 1868 Meiji Restoration that had completely rewritten and replaced the basic structure of government. Onisaburō made heavy reference to the nativist movement that had leaned on Shinto as a basis for authority during the Meiji Restoration, but which had lost out to Westernization

³⁹ Hyōdō, “Taishō-ki no ‘seishin’ gainen,” 101–103.

⁴⁰ Anesaki Masaharu, “Ōmotokyō ni tsuite,” *Hentai shinri* 6, no. 3 (1920), 202. Reprinted in *Anesaki Masaharu shū*, vol. 9 (Tokyo: Kress Shuppan, 2002). A clipping found among Anesaki’s papers shows that this article was reprinted in at least one period newspaper.

⁴¹ Anesaki, “Ōmotokyō ni tsuite,” 201, 206.

in successive reforms. The nativist movement served as a sort of lost dream of the nation for many former samurai and shrine priests, and the promise of its resurrection attracted spiritual seekers and military men to Oomoto.⁴²

Essentially, Oomoto employed national symbols in an unofficial but intriguing way that attracted many people to a specific group and a stated mission. Onisaburō produced a very large body of text, which he invited believers to study and contemplate. For this reason, Tsushiro Hirofumi refers to it as an “exoteric” attempt at “public religion.” As opposed to the cult of the emperor, a public religion which was grounded in “esoteric” vagaries rather than any specific code of law, Oomoto had openly published sacred texts and doctrines, including new interpretations of the national myths, which aimed to become the basis of public, civil authority.⁴³

This formed the basis of one of Anesaki’s two prongs of attack, in the pages of *Hentai Shinri* and his other major publications. Oomoto’s mission sought public authority and was available for all to observe, but reading what was available showed that it was misusing national symbols to make grand, world-historical promises, such as a new restoration, apocalypse, and world unification under the Emperor. These were the type of teachings that Yasumaru Yoshio would decades later classify as “heresy” against the state. These “exaggerated delusions,” as Anesaki put it, were damaging to the common good and powered by an unhealthy “fear” of war against Japan, and attracted the interest of military men and other spiritual seekers for all the wrong reasons.

Furthermore, undereducated believers were unable to recognize that these symbols were being misused because of a lack of religious education. Rather than Oomoto itself being at fault, the Japanese state, failing to recognize the “innate disposition to the religious mindset in society and in the individual,” had denigrated religion as outdated and worthless in its education programs, leading to a growing interest in movements like Oomoto that were willing to repel this anti-religious ideology. Similarly, authoritative restrictions on freedom of speech, including newspaper censorship and inspections of university programs for unorthodox religious or political education, made it only natural that people’s minds would be unable to mature and rise to the modern challenge, and that reactionary movements like Oomoto would arise instead.⁴⁴

⁴² Stalker, *Prophet Motive*, 48–49.

⁴³ Tsushiro Hirofumi, “*Kōkyō shūkyō no hikari to yami* (Tokyo: Shunjūsha, 2005), 237–8.

⁴⁴ Anesaki, “*Ōmotokyō ni tsuite*,” 206.

Oomoto as “Irrational” Misuse of Supernatural Authority

At the same time, Oomoto left a fairly large gap in its grand scheme. How exactly would the new “restoration” come about? How could believers bring about heaven on earth? Deguchi Nao, paralleling the activity of the gods in the world to a “jack-in-the-box,” had emphasized the uselessness of Western learning and the ability of divine reality to constantly surprise humans, and simply entrusted the gods to carry out the “remaking of the world” while using her as an agent.⁴⁵

Anesaki became exhausted with this intense faith. He even made up a new word for it, “ruckus-faith [*sōshin*],” to describe the “exaggerations” and “impulsiveness” that he felt gave it an anti-intellectual character. “They call the world a ‘jack-in-the-box,’” he wrote, signifying that “the causes and effects behind the changes of the world are large and distant from each other.” The use of relative terms should be noted here. For Anesaki, these teachings were not completely *without* reason, but rather adopted a worldview where large gaps were accepted without question: “the ties of reason are loosened.” This reflected the increasing pace of change that rewarded capitalists and quick thinkers who could anticipate the direction of society. Hence, Oomoto was not an opponent of the age, *but was, again, “suitable for the times”*. The problem was that it ignored the value of economic or sociological “research” to discover patterns in human behavior, and instead perverted this modern call to mercantilism into an overly intense faith in impending radical, world-transforming changes.⁴⁶ The deficiencies of “jack-in-the-box” thinking formed the other prong of his attack.

Anesaki did not attack Oomoto simply for invoking the supernatural, because he had no prejudices against the supernatural at all, and in fact believed it could even be included in academic research if it was used *rationally*. His interest in supernatural affairs can be traced back to his first trip abroad. In January 1902, his advisor Karl Robert Eduard von Hartmann warned him about becoming too involved in Spiritualism. While in England in October 1902, he joined the Society for Psychical Research and remained a member for 7 years. That month, he also visited the library of St. John’s College, Oxford, which was said to be haunted by a ghost; his diary records that “some people are said to have seen it and some to have heard its footsteps.”⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Morrow, “Power of Writing,” 167–171.

⁴⁶ Anesaki, *Shakai no dojō to seishinteki kakusei* (Tokyo: Hakubunkan, 1920), 76–81 (reprinted as *Anesaki Masaharu shū*, vol. 8); “Ōmotokyō ni tsuite,” 203.

⁴⁷ Anesaki, *Hito wa fumi nari* (Tokyo: Hakubunkan, 1918), 429 (reprinted as *Anesaki Masaharu shū*, vol. 4); “New Members,” *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research* 192 (October 1902), 273; Anesaki, *Wandering Clouds*, trans. Susanna Fessler (Fukuoka: Kurodahan Press, 2014), 9.

When Anesaki returned to the University of Tokyo in 1903, he taught a class on mysticism that included “theosophy, occultism, and psychical research.”⁴⁸ In 1908 he reported favorably on the Society for Psychical Research in one of Japan’s major newspapers, comparing its findings to cutting-edge nuclear physics.⁴⁹

Perhaps taking von Hartmann’s advice, Anesaki did not make spiritual research central to his work. The main body of his writing shows that he considered the developed traditions of established religions to be more valuable than new experiments. Perhaps he was seeking to avoid becoming a “pilgrim of superstition” himself. His mature writing often fell back on his own Buddhist beliefs, which are discussed in another section below.

However, Anesaki remained a believer that the spirit world was at least somewhat accessible to non-religious experimenters, and in 1918, he gave the literary public a review of developments in Western spiritual research. Offering his personal theory, akin to William James, that the individual human soul arises out of the “great spiritual flow” of the universe as an expression of a specific “ideal, the content of consciousness,” he summarizes:

I deny the existence of separate souls. Rather, *the flow of spirit develops into personalities. This is called the immortality of spirit.* (Emphasis in original) [...] Regarding so-called “spiritual research,” many books have been published recently, but among them Myers’ *Human Personality [and Its Survival of Bodily Death]*, 1903] should be called a masterpiece. Sir Oliver Lodge’s book *Raymond* [1916], a record of his conversations with the spirit of his son Raymond who died on the battlefield, contains some flaws.⁵⁰

Josephson-Storm shows that the attitude Anesaki displays here was broadly shared among period intellectuals. For example, Sigmund Freud was also a member of the Society for Psychical Research and spoke openly about his belief in spiritualism and the occult, upsetting British psychiatrists who thought this would damage the reputation of psychiatry.⁵¹ As Anesaki’s pub-

⁴⁸ Fukasawa Hidetaka, “Ikai no ‘jitsuzai mondai’: Asano/Anesaki ronsō to sono context,” *Bungaku*, November, 2001. For two accounts of the contents of this class, see the blog post “Anesaki Masaharu no kōgi ‘Shinpushugi’ o kīteita Takebayashi Musōsan,” *Jinbocho otaota nikki*. September 3, 2010. Accessed May 25, 2018. <http://d.hatena.ne.jp/jyunku/20100903>.

⁴⁹ Anesaki, “Hisomeru ishiki no kenkyū,” *Yomiuri shinbun*, November 18 and 19, 1908, page 5 of both issues.

⁵⁰ Anesaki, *Shinjūjū dai no shūkyō* (Tokyo: Hakubunkan, 1918), 94–5. Reprinted as *Anesaki Masaharu shū*, vol. 6. Lodge’s *Raymond* was very popular in Japan, but there may have been some distaste for its overly literal spiritualist message in intellectual circles. See Masato Nihei, “Spiritualism and Modernism in the Work of Kawabata Yasunari,” *Japan Forum* 30, no.1 (2018): 69–84.

⁵¹ Josephson-Storm, *Myth of Disenchantment*, 179–208.

lished work only rarely refers to occult research, it can be said that he was less invested in the subject than Freud.⁵²

One might wonder, however, why Anesaki was not interested in avoiding the subject altogether to portray himself as a neutral observer of religions. In the context of the book being quoted, there is an obvious answer: he was attempting to provide evidence to Japanese readers that a specific kind of spiritual practice should be the object of public sympathy and respect. This was the act of prayer at Yasukuni Jinja, a government-run shrine to war dead. He explains:

It was spring, just after the Russian war. At a ceremony at Yasukuni Jinja [...] I saw a single woman, her outfit unadorned but in a tidy style, holding the hand of a boy of about five or six and offering her respects fervently. [...] She was not merely grieving, and when I saw her address the child, I could see an expression like a smile, whether of joy, or of some kind of satisfaction. [...] There could be no doubt that this was the widow of a soldier who had passed away in the war, and that this child was the son of that late man. And for an instant, although I was not thinking of anything so significant that I would be aware of it the next day, I thought that I saw her, not so much mourning and praying at the shrine for her lost husband, but actually feeling that she was talking together with him. And, moved by her ardor and total sincerity, I myself, too, felt myself contacting some spirit, although I did not know whose spirit it was, and I felt as if my own heart was connected with the heart of the woman speaking together with her son to the spirit of her deceased husband.

[...] It is not my intention here to raise the question of whether Yasukuni Jinja is related to religion, or whether the faith of the woman I described here is based in true reality. What I would like to say, in a word, is that for human beings, there are temperaments which affect us, even if we cannot see, hear, or touch them.⁵³

There is an interesting logic being applied here. At least in theory, an American observing Memorial Day at Arlington National Cemetery might be moved to sympathy seeing a war widow at her husband's grave. But Anesaki goes slightly

⁵² It should be noted, however, that Anesaki's fervent belief in the power of the classical period sage Prince Shōtoku bordered on the occult. He spent long periods of time clipping letters from photocopies of manuscripts attributed to Shōtoku and reordering them into collages of varied lengths. He represented this to the public as a way to bring Shōtoku into the present day, and offered to get some of it published, but the sheer number of collages in his files shows that this was more like an occult practice or an obsession on his part. See Nishimura Akira, "Anesaki Masaharu Taishō kōki, Shōwa shoki no risō: Anesaki Masaharu 'Shōtoku Taishi onjikihitsu shashin'," *Kikan Nihon shisōshi* 59 (2001): 101-20.

⁵³ Anesaki, *Shinjū dai no shūkyō*, 33-35.

beyond that: he sees that feeling of sympathy as a spiritual, almost mystical experience, which is not merely a personal mental state but transcends the individual and becomes key to *public* goodwill. This basis for moral order is probably related to the early modern “philosophy of the heart” described by Yasumaru and Bellah (mentioned above), which in Anesaki’s day had developed into various theories about the nature of Shinto.

Before the 1940s, Yasukuni Jinja was hardly ever visited by intellectuals. In fact, other than on New Year’s holidays when ordinary Japanese flock to shrines, it was almost exclusively patronized by people with a personal connection to Japan’s armed forces.⁵⁴ And yet Anesaki apparently took a day out to visit it, as early as 1905, and what he saw there was fresh in his mind over a decade later. It is possible that he came in connection with his religious studies research, since he believed, contrary to most Japanese intellectuals of his time, that Yasukuni was not merely a place of civil ceremony but was grounded in a common religious feeling. But rather than discovering some sectarian ritual or dogma, he discovered the simple, pure emotions of a war widow, which he found it impossible to observe as a neutral bystander.

As alluded to above, Anesaki was a critic of unrestrained nationalism. While he celebrated the Russo-Japanese War as a struggle of liberation against European dominance, he also felt that true morality could only come from “awareness of the divine,” and that institutional religions were needed to “purify” to the emotional excesses of the patriotism seen at places like Yasukuni Jinja.⁵⁵ But the example of Yasukuni demonstrated to Anesaki that there are basic temperaments which *all* people ought to acknowledge; to do otherwise would be an insult to the families of the war dead, and to advocate for “disenchantment” would be *detrimental* to society.

For Anesaki, then, spiritual authority is real and has at least some proper uses. This contrasts quite strongly with Weber’s contemporary insistence that “nobody can doubt in his heart of hearts that science is irreligious” and that “life in communion with the divine” requires some rejection of rationality and scientific intellect.⁵⁶ From Anesaki’s viewpoint, the rational modern must acknowledge otherworldly “temperaments,” not reject them. From this core argument, he develops a discus-

⁵⁴ Kawamura Kunimitsu, *Tomurai-ron* (Tokyo: Seikyūsha, 2013), 142. This is also mentioned in William P. Woodard, “Yasukuni Shrine,” *Japan Christian Quarterly* 37, no. 2 (1971), 72.

⁵⁵ Isomae Jun’ichi, *Religious Discourse in Modern Japan: Religion, State, and Shinto* (Boston: Brill, 2014), 121–46, 169ff.

⁵⁶ Weber, “The Vocation of Science” (1917), quoted in *The Essential Weber: A Reader*, ed. Sam Whimster (New York: Routledge, 2003), 277.

sion, with many examples from European literature, of the emotional response we have towards other living beings, how that response continues after death, and finally how these issues are handled in English spiritual research.⁵⁷

In this respect, Anesaki's ideal of how spiritual attitudes could be used to unite the nation is threatened by Oomoto. Anesaki builds up an argument from a simple emotional experience to a "rational" basis for discussing spiritual matters. In Anesaki's conception, a proper, rational deployment of religious thought provides a solution to the "problem of cultivation" discussed above, contributing in a nonsectarian way to a common, pluralistic conception of the nation. But Oomoto's appeal to divine revelation replaces more ordinary concepts of the nation with visionary images and radical teachings handed down from charismatic founders. This constitutes an "irrational" rejection of liberal, pluralist discourse, again demonstrating not a flaw on Oomoto's part, but the deficiencies of a society that would produce such a movement.

While Anesaki's opinion of Oomoto is clearly quite low, he believes the best method to overcome this "timely" aberration is further encouragement of knowledge and intellectualism. His optimism may be compared to his mentor Max Müller, who believed that his own work publicizing the true teachings of Buddhism would "render such aberrations as Madame Blavatsky's Esoteric Buddhism impossible."⁵⁸ Anesaki's books push for further liberalization of speech laws and closer research into social psychology, including the works of Gabriel Tarde and William McDougall, so that society might better accommodate religious feeling and unrest. Otherwise, he warns, new charismatic movements like Oomoto will appear in future years (as they indeed did).⁵⁹

This socially grounded critique differed from the pathologizing of the other contributors to the special issue of *Hentai Shinri*, but it would have been applauded by period society as liberal and farsighted. It endorses in spirit the idea of individual freedom of religious belief, while in practice advocating that government authorities and elites suppress Oomoto's dangerous nationalist fervor for the time being, then adjust their education and censorship programs to prevent Japan from becoming a breeding ground of ultranationalists, a subject already of concern to many in 1920. There was no need to outlaw Oomoto's specific spiritual practices or claims, Anesaki insisted, because in a healthy liberal society, such claims would not catch on or pose a real political danger.

⁵⁷ Isomae Jun'ichi and Fukasawa Hidetaka, *Kindai Nihon ni okeru chishikijin to shūkyō* (Tokyo: Tōkyōdō Shuppan, 2002), 181.

⁵⁸ Max Müller, "Esoteric Buddhism." *The Nineteenth Century* 33 (1893): 767-88.

⁵⁹ Anesaki, *Shakai no dōyō*, 79; "Ōmotokyō ni tsuite," 205.

Oomoto as “Esoteric” Misuse of Academic Authority

Although Oomoto is described as an essentially “exoteric” doctrine above, much of its appeal lay in its reliance on the unexplained, and in this sense, it is also appropriate to say that it deploys “esotericism” (i.e. purposefully hidden revelations). Onisaburō recognized the appeal of Nao’s “jack in the box” defense against human reason, and employed it to full effect, using wordplay, anagrams, and unexplained metaphors to offer hints of what Heaven had in store.⁶⁰ He also edited Nao’s automatic writing to remove statements that were directly injurious to the Emperor, but purposefully left in blank spaces to create mysterious lines like “—— will soon bow to the true God,” letting readers make up their own minds about what name had been omitted.⁶¹ Yasumaru Yoshio observes that these blank spaces were “convenient for esotericism [*bikyō*]-infused interpretations,”⁶² and undercover investigations by police claimed to show that anti-monarchist readings of the text were indeed circulating secretly among believers.

Anesaki was aware of Oomoto’s secret political message and criticized its duplicity,⁶³ but this did not figure in his *Hentai Shinri* article. There, he stressed the necessity of laying a liberal, rational groundwork for boundaries to divide “religion” from “superstition” or “pseudo-religion.” His argument does not require any critique of secrecy. However, in a different kind of forum, he *does* end up criticizing a specific academic for endorsing Oomoto’s secrecy. This more private debate is not one Anesaki was involved in by choice: he was pulled into it by an accident involving his personal religious convictions, born from his closest and most tragic friendship.

While mourning the premature death of his friend Takayama Chogyū (1871–1902), Anesaki came to terms with the medieval Buddhist figure Nichiren, whose teachings Chogyū had embraced in his final years. At first, Anesaki openly denigrated Nichiren’s Buddhism as “chauvinistic” and obsessive and contrasted him negatively with Jesus and St. Francis. But eventually, after many years of participating in memorials for Chogyū, Anesaki declared himself a fellow believer, articulating a unique vision of Nichirenism that emphasized openness and liberality.⁶⁴

⁶⁰ Tsushiro, “*Kōkyō shūkyō*,” 224–5.

⁶¹ For details on Onisaburō’s editing, see Morrow, “Power of Writing,” 186n1, as well as Kawamura Kunimitsu, *Deguchi Nao/Onisaburō: sekai o suishō no yo ni itasu zo yo* (Kyoto: Minerva Shobō, 2017), 6–10.

⁶² Yasumaru Yoshio, *Ikki — kangoku — cosmology: shunsei no rekishigaku* (Tokyo: Mainichi Shinbun-sha, 1999), 208.

⁶³ See his interview, “Bōkoku to shinsei o kakushin suru Ōmotokyō no kikensei,” in *Asahi shinbun*, May 12, 1921, morning edition, 5.

⁶⁴ Terada Yoshiro, “Takayama Chogyū to Anesaki Masaharu no Nichiren-ron: Meiji-ki academism

In 1916, Anesaki and fellow friends of Chogyū founded a small magazine called *Jinbun* (*Humanities*) that endeavored to cover all topics relating to the humanities. However, many of the articles were about Buddhism, Nichiren, or Chogyū himself. For unknown reasons, while Anesaki was away on another foreign trip, the other editors of this magazine accepted an article from Asano Wasaburō (1874–1937), a University of Tokyo literature professor who had recently quit his job and converted to Oomoto.⁶⁵

Asano's article promoted Oomoto's doctrines and worldview, inviting disbelieving intellectuals to come experience *chinkon-kishin* possession for themselves. When Anesaki returned from his trip, he must have been aghast that a magazine he had founded in beloved memory of his Nichirenist friend had somehow printed an article promoting another religion entirely. There were obviously harsh complaints from readers, one of which was printed in the following issue. Anesaki was also obliged to respond himself and defend the mission of Chogyū, but now he had to walk a delicate line: it would have been highly inconvenient to cast doubt on his neutrality as a scholar of religion, not to mention the stated purpose of the magazine to honor the liberal arts. This is how he chose to handle it:

This magazine is of course a free forum, and it cannot be denied that we offer to the public the differing opinions of various people. However, Mr. Asano's confession of faith is concealing various matters besides the confession. [...] He tells us that "now is not the time to make this public," or that there are matters that "even a rain of blood falling on your heads will not convince you of", in other words concealing various matters by saying that they cannot be revealed to those who are not on this path.⁶⁶

Of Anesaki's three reasons for critiquing Oomoto, it appears that this is the only one that should properly be described as a critique of esotericism. In fact, this has already been argued by the Japanese scholar Fukasawa Hidetaka, who, analyzing the fascinating tension of this argument, observes that Anesaki is accusing Asano of "*mystification* and *esoterism*" (both written as English loan-words).⁶⁷

no Nichiren rikai," in *Kingendai no hokeke undō to zaike kyōdan* (Tokyo: Shunjūsha, 2014), 164–193.

⁶⁵ For details on Asano's conversion, see Helen Hardacre, "Asano Wasaburō and Japanese Spiritualism in Early Twentieth Century Japan," in *Japan's Competing Modernities: Issues in Culture and Democracy 1900–1930*, ed. Sharon Minichiello (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1998): 133–153.

⁶⁶ Anesaki, "Asano-kun no shinkō kokuhaku ni tsuite," *Jinbun* 1, no. 11 (1916).

⁶⁷ Fukasawa, "Jitsuzai mondai," 14.

But here, the scholar cannot but be flummoxed. Anesaki's other critiques were of Oomoto's effect on the Japanese public. They accused Oomoto of misusing public symbolism and spiritual authority and suggested a political remedy. In contrast, this more private announcement regrets that Asano's statements are not befitting the position of a liberal arts scholar. The esotericism being critiqued here is not a proposition about the world, but a proposition about how scholarly writing should be conducted. Elsewhere, Anesaki was critical of intellectuals who fail to disclose their entire program. He wrote that a failure to present the full facts of one's plan to the public "brings about a dulling of conscience" and prevents the public debate necessary for democratic societies to thrive. In this context he critiqued the collaboration between scholars and the state that he had witnessed in the German Empire during the buildup to the Great War.⁶⁸

Such boundary work bears politically valuable fruit: in this case, it provides a justification for disqualifying Asano as a scholar and denying him the right of reply in the pages of *Jinbun*.⁶⁹ But the context in which this critique of Asano appears makes it intensely ironic. For Asano's "confession of faith" had been completely open, while Anesaki, in response, must word his reply very carefully so that he cannot be accused of excluding Asano's viewpoint based on mere religious differences — even though it is very hard to imagine anyone could possibly read the article without being aware of Anesaki's own religious convictions. Furthermore, the real reason Asano's right of reply was revoked was obviously because he had angered the journal's Nichirenist readership. Anesaki is accusing Asano of "concealment" as a pretext that superficially conceals his own concealment.

This is not to accuse Anesaki of hypocrisy *per se*, as it is a reasonable question whether any writer can avoid the act of concealment.⁷⁰ Indeed, Asano was consciously concealing much more than Anesaki: in 1920 he secretly circulated a manifesto that modeled Oomoto after the global conspiracy of the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, claiming that Oomoto was not a mere religion but the "true" conspiracy against the world.⁷¹ However, we cannot avoid recognizing that the way in which Anesaki treats this strategy of concealment, secrecy, and conspiracy is unusual and revealing. He is not concerned with claims to higher or more spiritual knowledge, nor with use of the power of

⁶⁸ Anesaki, *Shakai no dōyō*, 234.

⁶⁹ Asano's desire to reply to Anesaki directly can be seen in his contribution to the following issue of the Oomoto in-house organ *Shinreikai* (January 1, 1917), 12-16; reprinted in *Shinreikai*, vol. 1 (Tokyo: Hachiman Shoten, 1986), 20-24.

⁷⁰ Jacques Derrida, *La dissémination* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1972), 79.

⁷¹ Reproduced in Ikeda Akira, ed., *Omoto shiryō shūsei*, vol. 2 (Tokyo: San'ichi Shobō, 1981), 195-210.

correspondences or of imagination, as he finds that such claims, in the form of “mysticism” and “religions,” can cultivate citizens to meet needs of the state in a healthy way.⁷² In other words, Anesaki is not concerned with the aspects of esotericism as defined by Antoine Faivre.⁷³

Rather, the target of Anesaki’s criticism appears to be the type of esoteric writing identified by Leo Strauss, in which philosophers rendered their public writing ambiguous by simultaneously advertising and concealing cryptic hidden motives.⁷⁴ While both Faivre and Strauss use the term “esoteric” to denote strategies of concealment, Strauss was addressing much different questions, which are rarely taken up in studies that build on or reply to Faivre. Rather than a “waste-basket” of unorthodox epistemologies which built itself into “the polemical ‘Other’” of the “academy,”⁷⁵ Strauss claimed that esotericism, as a specific *rhetorical* method for making epistemological claims, had permeated Western thought since the days of the original Academy of Plato. He further claimed that the split between the ancient Academy and our modern academy originated with Spinoza, who denounced concealment in writing and called for a “disenchanted” naturalist epistemology.⁷⁶

Anesaki does not share the “disenchanted” epistemology of Spinoza, but he does share the modern academy’s distaste for concealment. He is concerned that for Asano and Oomoto, writing serves different rhetorical functions from the way it ought to work in an open society. Although Anesaki is unable to completely keep concealment out of his own writing, he is suspicious of how Asano *embraces* the privileged knowledge implied through esoteric writing and aims to derive authority from it — what Fukasawa calls “mystification.” Anesaki cannot go after the heart of the epistemological claim, but he can and does respond by constructing boundaries for his “free forum.”

Conclusion: Esotericism in the Academy

I have described three critiques Anesaki made of Oomoto: the first two being that its misuse of national and spiritual authority reflects the deficiencies of an illiberal religious policy, and the third that its leaders summons up the authority

⁷² Isomae, *Religious Discourse*, 166–175.

⁷³ Antoine Faivre, *Access to Western Esotericism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), 3–35.

⁷⁴ Daniel Tanguay, *Leo Strauss: An Intellectual Biography* (Yale University Press, 2007), 83.

⁷⁵ Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy*, 146, 254.

⁷⁶ Tanguay, *Leo Strauss*, 11, 28–29.

of secrecy in an inappropriate way. Of these three criticisms, the first two are offered in a scientific journal and appeal to the public for a more liberal attitude towards speech and belief. The final criticism, however, reveals a fascinating, deeper fear about what sort of speech might emerge from such liberalism. Asano's desire for secrecy in his writing threatens to upset the delicate balance of the journal *Jinbun*, necessitating careful boundary work on Anesaki's part.

The identification of Anesaki's reply as a critique of "mystification" or esoteric writing in the Straussian sense, a point on which I concur with Fukasawa, could certainly be claimed to lay the groundwork for Asprem's class of analogical research projects relating the history of Western thought to non-Western applications, which he articulates as follows:

Looking beyond the particular to see how similar "forms of thought," secretive organisations, or claims to higher knowledge play out in contexts beyond the West [...] may even help uncover selection pressures and environmental factors that can help explaining the emergence of esotericism in "the West," and formulate more precise and theoretically refined definitions. [...] What can the cognitive science of religion tell us about the generation and transmission of "forms of thought" or "cognitive styles" considered unique to Western esotericism? Is there a dynamic of "convergent cultural evolution" that sheds light on the formation of "esoteric-like" groups, movements, discourses, experiences, or idea-structures?⁷⁷

Certainly, we may identify the "pressures," the "environmental factors," and even the "cognitive styles" that propel Anesaki through a maze of logical quandaries so that he can develop a critique of esoteric writing. We may furthermore see that Anesaki's boundary work is helping to produce a modern academy free of esoteric writing, an act of "convergent" institutional construction. However, how do we know, firstly, that such boundary work is "cultural evolution" rather than political manipulation or something else, and secondly, that the accusation of esoteric writing is itself enough to label Oomoto as an "esoteric-like" group or movement?

As I have emphasized, Anesaki not only believed in cultural progress, he also believed that through this progress groups like Oomoto would naturally decline. Yet, in his *Hentai Shinri* article he is not pressed through "environmental factors" or "cognitive styles" to come up with a concept of "esotericism." Instead, he was led to this concept specifically to exclude Asano from an academic forum. This suggests that his critique was not an "evolution" but was subjective and served a pragmatic goal. Indeed, such an interpretation can be buttressed by much of twentieth-century philosophy.

⁷⁷ Asprem, "Beyond the West," 29.

In Strauss's historiography, the rejection of esoteric writing eventually led to a redefinition of what philosophy was and how it was accomplished, with close reading to uncover secret meanings being replaced by proclamations of openness. However, because deconstructive reading is always possible, we cannot say that this new breed of philosophers was truly able to accomplish openness, nor that the act of writing can avoid concealment. Where Aspren analogizes "esoteric-like" ideas to the wing structure on a bat or a bird to make the case for "convergent evolution," I would object that this is only the case if we are to claim that all animals have wings when we look closely enough.

Instead of constructing the "disenchantment of the world" as a problem that emerged organically out of deeper *objective knowledge* of the universe, we should acknowledge that it is a *myth* created through countless acts of *human subjectivity*.⁷⁸ Anesaki excluded Asano because the type of project he was engaging in was dangerous, not because it was necessarily false. Boundary work is not about what the world *actually is*, and acknowledging this means rejecting the narcissistic projection of the sociologist's own ideals onto society at large, and returning to the more serious question of what those ideals ought to be.

If this does not bode well for the characterization of esotericism as a type of mental functioning separable from the ordinary, it should be recognized that it does not necessarily lend credence to the characterization of esotericism as a mere historical construction either. Historicist awareness of hidden theological biases behind the category of "esotericism" attempts to reflect upon the shortcomings of Enlightenment rationalism, but of course there is nothing more Enlightened or rationalist than to discover and reject a hidden theological bias.⁷⁹

Both of these methods privilege reflexive research programs over non-reflexive programs as a way to "dig our way out of" esotericism. This is extremely common in the human sciences these days, and yet there is no unambiguous indication that reflexive programs can create a position of privilege from which non-reflexive programs can be critiqued.⁸⁰ To discover uses for factual knowledge in an era that has moved beyond "absolute knowledge," academism cannot merely refine the boundaries of its existing research programs through reflexive study: we must find the cleavage points at which these boundaries can be disrupted entirely.

⁷⁸ Aspren, *Problem of Disenchantment*, 30-31; Josephson-Storm, *Myth of Disenchantment*, 314.

⁷⁹ As Josephson-Storm acknowledges: *Myth of Disenchantment*, 316.

⁸⁰ Michael Lynch, "Against Reflexivity as an Academic Virtue and Source of Privileged Knowledge," *Theory, Culture, and Society* 17, no. 3 (2000): 26-54.

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Deification as a Core Theme in Julius Evola's Esoteric Works

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Abstract

“Deification” or “Becoming God” is used in this article as a central hermeneutical key to understand Julius Evola’s (1898-1974) philosophic and, most importantly, esoteric work. Although the concept of deification can be found in his early work, it naturally developed itself and underwent many transfigurations, for which he employed different forms of symbolic systems. One cornerstone of his intellectual buildings has remained constant, however: the desperate endeavor to transcend the limitations of the human being. To find and teach “practical” paths to reach this goal became the supreme aim in his works.

Keywords

Julius Evola; deification; magic; Tantrism; salvation; spiritual development

The Early Years

Evola's efforts to overcome the ordinary conditions of life can be detected when he was still a young man. This soon led him to an exploration of transcendental realms not bound by material limits. He remarked in his "spiritual autobiography," written in 1963, that his decisive impulse toward transcendence "manifested itself" in him "from his earliest years."¹ This can also be clearly seen in his artistic period, from 1915 to 1923, when he became one of the most renowned Dadaists in Italy. In his brochure *Arte astratta* [*Abstract Art*], written in 1920 when he was 22 years old, he expressed it in the following way:

I see art as an interest-free creation that comes from an individual's higher consciousness and is therefore capable of transcending the passions and the crystallizations that are based upon common experiences, and which is independent of them.²

Another sign of Evola's urge for transcendence is the recurrence of alchemical symbolism in his abstract art.³ This urge to be different from common man is also shown in his striving for an absolute self-sufficiency of the "I" as a necessary condition for genuine freedom. Not to depend on anything outside himself was his ultimate goal. It was the young Italian philosopher Carlo Michelstaedter (1887–1910), who guided him in this direction, and Evola continued to work toward this end for the rest of his life. Thus, he said, real

value is found only in that which exists for itself, which demands the principle of inner life and personal power from nothing and nobody – in autarchy.⁴

There is only a small step from demanding total autarchy to the conviction of being in control of everything. This was the necessary condition for what

¹ Julius Evola, *The Path of Cinnabar: An Intellectual Autobiography of Julius Evola*, trans. by Sergio Knipe (London: Integral Tradition, 2009), 11. Translation of Julius Evola, *Il cammino del cinabro* (Milano, All'insegna del pesce d'oro, 1963). I use the term "spiritual autobiography" because the text contains very little biographical information, and is rather a guide to his books.

² Julius Evola, *Arte astratta* (Roma, Maglione e Strini, 1920), 8. All translations, unless otherwise indicated, are my own.

³ This has been pointed out by the major Italian art critic Carlo Fabrizio Carli in his essay "Evola: la pittura e l'alchimia; un tracciato," in *Julius Evola e l'arte delle avanguardie* (Roma: Fondazione Julius Evola, 1998), 55–60. See also Elisabetta Valento, *Homo Faber: Julius Evola fra arte e alchimia* (Roma: Fondazione Julius Evola, 1994), particularly 54, and Vitaldo Conte, "Evola e l'arte-poesia," in *Julius Evola e la sua eredità culturale*, a cura di Gianfranco de Turreis (Roma: Edizioni Mediterranee, 2017), 23–37.

⁴ Julius Evola, *Saggi sull'idealismo magico* (Todi-Roma: Atanòr, 1925), 136.

Evola named the “Absolute Individual,” and it became the aim of his philosophical system, which he called “Magical Idealism.” The term is taken from the German poet Novalis (1772–1801), but it is likely that Evola first came across it in the writings of Giovanni Papini (1881–1956), the Italian poet and philosopher who Evola befriended during his Futurist period, from 1915 to 1919.⁵ Papini, according to Evola,

brought particularly noteworthy works [...] to the attention of young people like myself, thus providing the young with some genuine guidance.⁶

In 1903 Papini had written an essay titled “L’Uomo-Dio” [The God-Man], in which he talks about various ways to transform oneself.⁷ Papini puts particular significance on Meister Eckhart (c. 1260–c. 1328) and his process of *deificatio*, which renounces the mundane world through a kind of purification process.⁸ It was Papini, as Evola reveals in his biography, who prompted him to study Meister Eckhart’s doctrine.⁹ Evola did so using the German edition of Meister Eckhart’s *Deutsche Predigten und Traktate* [*German Sermons and Tracts*], in which one can find the following crucial sentence about God and man:

If I am to recognize God in an immediate way, then *I* must become *he* and *he* must become *I* [...] so completely at one, that this *he* and this *I* are one, and will become and be one, and exist and act eternally in this way and form of being.¹⁰

The Philosophical Period

In 1925, Evola’s first major philosophical work, *Saggi sull’idealismo magico* [*Essays on Magical Idealism*], was published. In the text he developed his notion of “Magical

⁵ Papini seems to have been one of the first to popularize the work of Michelstaedter (see Antonio Martuscelli in his article “Carlo Michelstaedter Filosofo,” Rodoni, accessed October 1, 2018, <http://www.rodoni.ch/busoni/bibliotechina/michelstaedter/filosofo.html>). Evola apparently became familiar with Carlo Michelstaedter’s work through his close friend Emilio Michelstaedter, who was Carlo’s cousin (see Giuliano Borghi and Gian Franco Lami, *Introduzione a Julius Evola* (Roma: Volpi, 1980), 85).

⁶ Julius Evola, *The Path of Cinnabar*, 11.

⁷ Giovanni Papini, “L’Uomo-Dio,” *Leonardo* 1, no. 3 (January 27, 1903): 3.

⁸ It seems that Papini even made an attempt to “become God” in a secluded place apparently under the guidance of Arturo Reghini, as Evola reports in *The Path of Cinnabar*, loc. cit., 78.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 12.

¹⁰ Meister Eckhart, *Schriften und Predigten*, ed. E. Büttner (Jena: E. Diedrichs, 1912), 167. Evola himself indicates this edition in his *Saggi sull’idealismo magico*, 48, n. 1.

Idealism” using not only philosophical concepts, but also elements from Henry Cornelius Agrippa (1486–1535) and the Western esoteric tradition,¹¹ as well as elements from Tantrism and the Upanishads. His philosophical aim was to reach absolute knowledge that was totally certain and where doubt was not possible. But such a knowledge was not imaginable as long as his thinking was modeled after the outside world, as is usually the case, because this world was beyond his reach and thus fundamentally uncertain. Evola dates his main philosophical efforts to the years 1923 to 1927, although some of his writings during these years were published only later, as late as 1930.¹²

Evola had studied mathematics and, reflecting on the mathematical and geometrical theses of Bernhard Riemann (1826–1866), who had theorized a fourth dimension and paved the way for Einstein’s general theory of relativity, was no longer convinced of the absolute certainty of mathematical theorems. Evola strongly maintained that nothing was absolutely certain for the “I,” unless it had total power over all conditions determining the object in view. One can only have absolute certainty with regard to an object of which one fully dominates the principle and all its causes. The I must thus become a profound center of dominion and power. To meet this requirement, however, it is “in fact necessary to put the I in the place of God.”¹³ The logical solution for Evola was therefore to model the world after his thinking. By being master of his thinking, he also became master of what his thinking produced. To him, Magical Idealism meant not reproducing the world passively, but rather generating it actively.¹⁴

As a result of his concepts of freedom and power, which were heavily influenced by the writings of John Woodroffe (who wrote under the pseudonym of Arthur Avalon, 1865–1936), Evola longed for the “absolute individual” with absolute freedom and absolute power, but also absolute responsibility. “The body of the absolute individual is the universe,” Evola said.¹⁵ This “absolute individual” – analogous to the Indian concept of the *ātman* – is the expression of a complete and abundant power that inevitably grows out of total spiritual realization and the actual *lived experience* of it. Evola considered absolute freedom

¹¹ Evola cites Agrippa (*De occulta philosophia* I, 1) approvingly saying that according to the latter’s teachings the “magicians” deem it possible to penetrate all three worlds reaching finally the archetypal world, which creates and maintains all the others. Therefore the “true” magicians are able to act from this world on all natural powers and spark even new ones.” Evola, *Saggi sull’idealismo magico*, 73.

¹² Evola, *The Path of Cinnabar*, loc. cit., 26.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 35.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 33.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 127.

to be a primary sign of being “God,” as it required being grounded in oneself alone and not depending upon any external factor. The later chapters in the book, which bear titles such as “The Construction of Immortality” and “The Essence of Magical Development,” clearly show the direction of Evola’s thinking.

The first explicit appearance of the term “farsi dio” [to make oneself God] that I have found in Evola’s writing is in an article in *Ignis*, the magazine edited by his early mentor Arturo Reghini (1878-1946), in which he remarked: “There is only one way to prove God: to make oneself God.”¹⁶ Later on in this article he speaks about Novalis and his ideas on man becoming God.¹⁷ He then writes about Kirilloff, one of the protagonists in Dostojewsky’s (1821-1881) novel *Demons* (*The Possessed*), who does not believe in God and does not accept inventing an imaginary God like many generations had done before him, and is therefore forced to manifest his own divinity in order to demonstrate that God exists. Evola enumerates the attributes of Kirilloff’s so-called divinity: first his free will and particularly all actions with which he can prove his insubordination to God. This new and terrifying freedom is most convincingly proved, according to Kirilloff, by committing suicide. He who dares to kill himself has found the secret to becoming God. To commit suicide he must conquer utmost fear, but as a result he will become the new man that is God. Evola also alludes in this essay to an analogous practice of *kundalini-yoga*, which cuts right through the root of organic life itself. This is said by the Tantric tradition to provoke a supernal light shining through the chaos, whereupon the realized can take possession of the “three kingdoms,” having thus become supreme Lord towering even above (a personal) God.¹⁸

Based on talks he gave in 1925 at conferences of the Lega Teosofica Indipendente in Rome, Evola published his seminal essay, “L’individuo e il divenire del mondo” [The Individual and the Becoming of the World], which was issued as a modest brochure of only forty pages in 1926.¹⁹ In reality, this was a condensed synthesis of his three major philosophical works, which

¹⁶ Julius Evola, “Diòniso,” *Ignis*, anno I, no. 11-12 (novembre/dicembre 1925): 357, 367.

¹⁷ Novalis’s idea was that man in future should become independent from God and through this become God himself, insofar as all the attributes of God such as omniscience, omnipotence, and immortality would be characteristic of the single individual, too.

¹⁸ Evola alludes to this in “Diòniso,” loc. cit. 368, and calls this practice *kevala-kumbhala* (stopping the breathing in deep meditation). This is a complete dominance of the mental faculties. *Kundalini* awakens and there are no obstacles any more in *sushumna*, where *kundalini* is flowing and thus unification with the Absolute is made possible.

¹⁹ Julius Evola, *L’individuo e il divenire del mondo* (Roma, Libreria di Scienze e Lettere, 1926). Reprint: (Roma, Ed. Mediterranee, 2015). This revised and reviewed edition includes several essays that put the importance of this text into the right perspective. I use this edition, as the first edition is extremely rare.

partly came out only years later, because Evola lacked a publisher. He later referred to this brochure, in *The Path of Cinnabar*, as a text written “in a state of intellectual vertigo.”²⁰ Here Evola is very explicit and says:

We bitterly fight all the intellectual and philosophical rhetoric by means of which man amuses himself to talk *around* his impotence instead of jumping up, gripping it then firmly and burning it so that he becomes what he really is: *A God, a Builder of the world.*²¹

One page later he exclaims: “And therefore the individual has only one imperative: BE, become GOD, *and in so doing, make the world be, SAVE the world.*”²²

Up to this point in his philosophical work, Evola had sought to tackle the question of “becoming God” in a speculative way. A further, more “practical” step in Evola’s approach can be traced back to his studies of the Mithras cult. It was less the outward rituals that interested him than the inner experiences of the adepts of these mysteries. In the first sentence of his article “The Way of Realization of Oneself According to the Mysteries of Mithras,”²³ he declares that at a certain stage (of inner development) it becomes clear that the myths of the (ancient) mysteries are essentially allusive transcriptions of a series of states of consciousness along the path of self-realization.²⁴ That is why he regards Mithraism as part of the “great Western magical [i.e. for Evola initiatic] tradition.”²⁵ In a footnote, he underlines that as his basis he had studied the historical facts of Mithraism as expounded by the texts of Franz Cumont (1868–1947), Albrecht Dieterich (1866–1908), and George Robert Stow Mead (1863–1933).²⁶ In this fundamental and highly original essay, Evola described some basic ideas of the initiatic path that would be taught in the later Group of UR (1927–1929),²⁷ where they were to be further developed in a systematical

²⁰ Julius Evola, *The Path of Cinnabar*, loc. cit., 76.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 37.

²² *Ibid.*, 38. The English text is taken from Thomas Sheehan, “*Diventare Dio: Julius Evola and the Metaphysics of Fascism*,” *Stanford Italian Review* 6, nos. 1–2 (1986): 284.

²³ Julius Evola, “La via della realizzazione di sé secondo I Misteri di Mithra,” in *Ultra* 20, no. 3 (Giugno 1926): 146–54.

²⁴ This affirmation is of paramount importance to Evola’s understanding of all forms of traditional, initiatic teachings.

²⁵ Evola, “La via della realizzazione di sé,” 146.

²⁶ Franz Cumont, *The Mysteries of Mithra* (Chicago: The Open Court Publishing Company, 1903); Albrecht Dieterich, *Eine Mithrasliturgie* (Leipzig: B.G. Teubner, 1903); George Robert Stow Mead, *Fragments of a Faith Forgotten* (London: Theosophical Publishing Society, 1900). Evola, “La via della realizzazione di sé,” 154.

²⁷ For a full story of the Group of Ur see Renato del Ponte, *Julius Evola e il magico gruppo di*

way and corroborated by material from other traditions as well. In the Mithraic mysteries the aspirant was guided on a well-defined itinerary through seven stages to a final initiation above the seventh sphere “in which there is neither a here nor a not-here, which is stillness, illumination and solitude like in an infinite ocean,” and which is called the grade of the Father.²⁸

As Stefano Arcella, a specialist on Mithraism at the Fondazione Humaniter in Naples, emphasizes in his compelling introductory essay to the new edition of this essay,²⁹ it cannot be over-stressed that Evola’s reading of the Mithraic mysteries was unique and thoroughly original compared to other academic publications of the time. Evola was the first to point out the precise correspondence of each symbolic degree to an exact technical-operative phase of realization on this path of deification.

Tantrism

A decisive practical step in this direction was formed by Evola’s study of Tantrism, enabled by the translations of Sir John Woodroffe, who used the pseudonym of Arthur Avalon for his translations of Indian source-texts carried out with Indian experts. It was Decio Calvari (1863–1937), the head of the Lega Teosofica Indipendente, who acquainted him with this Far Eastern path,³⁰ which excited Evola so much that a rather important correspondence with Woodroffe ensued.³¹ Tantrism taught Evola not an intellectual or ascetic-contemplative path, but rather a whole system based on techniques leading towards god-like self-realization and practical self-transformation through one’s own power. As Woodroffe put it in his seminal work *S’akti and S’akta* (1918), which was one of the most important texts on Tantrism for Evola, and was quoted by him numerous times: “The unfolding of this self-power is to be brought about by self-realization which is to be achieved through Sadhana (practice).”³² Evola explains:

Ur (Borzano: SEAR, 1994), and for an extensive English overview see Hans Thomas Hakl, “Julius Evola and the UR Group,” *Aries* 12 (2012): 53–90.

²⁸ Evola, “La via della relizzazione di sé,” 154. *Ibid.*, 154.

²⁹ Julius Evola, *La via della realizzazione di sé secondo I Misteri di Mithra* (Napoli: Controcorrente, 2007), 31.

³⁰ For more details on Evola’s dealings with this special theosophical lodge, where he got to know several important Italian esotericists and orientologists, see Marco Rossi, “Julius Evola e la Lega Teosofica Indipendente di Roma,” *Storia Contemporanea* 25 (February 1994): 39–56.

³¹ Unfortunately, only one letter to Woodroffe has survived. But Evola mentioned the Englishman’s comments in several of his works, e.g. *The Path of Cinnabar*, loc. cit., 71. Evola also translated Avalon’s *The World as Power: Arthur Avalon, Il mondo come Potenza*, trans. Julius Evola (Roma: Edizioni Mediterranee, 1973).

³² Sir John Woodroffe, *S’akti and S’akta*, 9th ed. (Madras: Ganesh, 1969), 15.

Here knowledge is not a luxury, but a tool for action and for the annulment of the obscurity and passivity which dominate profane life. Liberation and knowledge, metaphysics and self-realization, thought and power are here one and the same thing.³³

This dominant and immediate desire for a personal, practical realization perhaps explains why Evola developed an affinity for Tantrism, and not for Mahayana Buddhism, which aims at the redemption of all sentient beings. In his book *L'uomo come potenza* [*Man as Power*] Evola shows himself to be midway between philosophical speculation and actual experience through practice.³⁴ His main interest lay in the *Shakti-Tantras*, the *Tantras* of Power, and in the so-called “Left-Hand Path,” which was specially adapted for the *vira*, the “heroic” man, and “supreme path of the absolute absence of law” devoid of any “fetish of morality.”³⁵ A few lines later on Evola adds:

The “idea of becoming God” was perceived as blasphemous and Luciferian in the West [...] By contrast, the notion of the deep identity of the Self, or *atma* with *Brahman*, the absolute principle of the universe, and the formula which expresses it – “I am *Brahman*” or “I am Him” ... which in Tantrism becomes “I am Her”, i.e. *Shakti*, or Power) – were all widely perceived in the East as truths marking the path of knowledge and the destruction of “ignorance which one leads man to believe that he is merely human.”³⁶

The central topic of *L'uomo come potenza* is power (*shakti*) as the primordial cosmic energy and feminine creative force in the universe. Besides such religious or “esoteric” explanations, Evola’s practical understanding of power is idiosyncratic, and to avoid misunderstandings it must be thoroughly analyzed. For him, power was definitely something that did not merely derive from the earthly plane, but had to have a higher reference point. As a result, in a practical sense it can also be seen as being a “divine” attribute with which one can identify. Power is essentially a natural quality of someone who is truly (spiritually) strong and unshakable. It is by necessity bound to such a person, just as the power of water surges around a strong bridge pylon in a river, without the pylon itself doing anything. True power is simply there and operates on its own. It is the unity of subject and object. This peculiar usage of Evola’s concept of power also holds true for his political work. Not understanding this has led many of his political commentators to completely wrong conclusions.

³³ Julius Evola, *L'uomo come potenza* (Todi-Roma: Atanòr, n.d. [1926]), 9.

³⁴ Later, in Julius Evola, *La yoga della potenza* (Milano: Fratelli Bocca, 1949), he brought out a complete revised edition of this book, devoid of the Western intellectuality that characterized the first edition.

³⁵ Terms used by Evola in *The Path of Cinnabar*, loc. cit., 70, when speaking about this book.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 71.

In the revised German version of his first political book, *Heidnischer Imperialismus* [*Pagan Imperialism*],³⁷ Evola therefore emphasized that

superiority is not based on power, but rather power is based on superiority. To use power is impotence, and he who understands this will perhaps understand in which sense the path to a certain renunciation (a “masculine” renunciation based on “not needing anything” and on “being satisfied”)³⁸ can be a condition for the path to the highest power, and he can also comprehend the concealed logic, according to which [...] ascetics, saints, and initiates suddenly and naturally develop suggestive and supra-sensual powers which are stronger than any power of human beings and things.³⁹

Power is simply the *pure* strength of a spiritual act in which spiritual vision and action meld into one. This spiritual, “magical” power cannot therefore be compared with the “power” of modern technology, which simply makes use of the existing laws of nature. For example, anyone can flick a switch and the light will come on. By contrast, action that emanates from this “magical” type of power necessarily presupposes an inner change of being for the person acting. This change has firstly elevated him to a higher level from where he stands above (material) things and has command over them from the realm of the spiritual. In order to attain such a power, or, still better, in order to *attract* such a power, the spirit and the I must strive toward perfection, toward unification with the “gods.”⁴⁰

Back to *L'uomo come potenza*. After theorizing extensively about power in the Tantric doctrine, Evola's concern shifts immediately to the technique of achieving this power, which is essential to transcend human nature. This is carried out through several steps of purification, divinization of man's natural functions, opening of the *chakras*, awakening of the *kundalini* as human equivalent of the cosmic energy, and the construction of a cosmic body. In the course of this itinerary comes the identification of the “I” with *Shakti*: “Between this power which is everything, and me there is no difference whatsoever. Verily, I am *parashakti* (highest force of the highest being),” Evola writes.⁴¹ To show the universal truth of this statement for the initiate he quotes a whole passage from the *Corpus Hermeticum*:

³⁷ Julius Evola, *Heidnischer Imperialismus* (Leipzig: Armanen Verlag, 1933). *Imperialismo Pagano*, the earlier Italian version of this book, published in 1928, differs from this expanded German version.

³⁸ The strong influence of Carlo Michelstaedter is unmistakable here.

³⁹ Julius Evola, *Heidnischer Imperialismus*, loc. cit., 32f.

⁴⁰ Evola takes this idea from Tantrism, insofar as power = *shakti* is something “feminine” which is drawn to the “masculine” “unmoved mover,” similar to how eddies in a river form around the bridge pylons.

⁴¹ Julius Evola, *L'uomo come potenza*, loc. cit., 195.

If then you do not make yourself equal to God you cannot apprehend God; for like is known by like. Leap clear of all that is corporeal and make yourself grow to like expanse with that greatness which is beyond all measures ... For it is the height of evil not to know God.⁴²

Towards the end of the text Evola again underlines the special features of Tantrism:

Tantric yoga differs from the other branches of yoga related to the Samkhya and Vedanta schools insofar as it refutes the purely intellectual methods (*dhyana-yoga*) and claims to achieve spirit through the powers of the body not aiming at an ascetic liberation but at a liberation which is simultaneously possession, dominion and enjoyment of the earthly reality.⁴³

Before the last chapter, in which Evola compares and contrasts Tantrism and Christianity, he gives an account of the hierarchical steps of Tantric practices until the material body is resolved into the cosmic body,⁴⁴ and *kundalini*, the power which through animal generation ties man to a finite and mortal existence, is transformed into the power “which renders man a God.”⁴⁵

With this book, Evola had definitely defined all the necessary theoretical and practical steps to “become God,” which for him became another term for spiritual self-realization to the highest degree, which leads to and allows one to identify with transcendence. Evola’s following works on magic, Alchemy, and Buddhism were based on exactly the same esoteric principles outlined here and formed only the various adaptations required for these other teachings proving to him that all “true” initiatic paths came from one transcendental and primordial source, a central idea he had adopted from René Guénon (1886–1951). The necessary steps towards total liberation and immortality, tantamount to Evola to becoming God, were practically always the same: purification; identification with higher states of consciousness (i.e. with the various gods, and spheres = liberation from the material world); and finally identification with the highest principle, which entails absolute freedom and spiritual immortality, that is, salvation.⁴⁶ The only differenc-

⁴² Chapter 11, 20b–21b, *Corpus Hermeticum*, vol. 1, trans. Walter Scott (Boston: Shambhala, 1985), 221. Here I use Walter Scott’s translation of *Corpus Hermeticum*. Evola used the French translation, by Louis Ménard, (Paris: Didier, 1866).

⁴³ Julius Evola, *L’uomo come potenza*, loc. cit., 291.

⁴⁴ “[...] the old body of sin is destroyed and in its stead there lives a new divine body,” corresponding to the Gnostic “body of resurrection,” as Evola underlines (*ibid.*, 290f.).

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 292.

⁴⁶ To summarize Iamblichus’ famous work *De Mysteriis*, the purpose of every theurgy is the

es were the symbolism and the language used in the various traditions. It remains intriguing to see how Evola always seemed to be able to find hundreds of pertinent quotations in the primary sources of all those respective fields in order to prove his hypothesis.

Group of UR — High Magic

Let us start in chronological order with Evola's endeavors in "High magic." In 1927, together with Arturo Reghini, he founded the Group of UR, one of the most challenging magical orders of the twentieth century, which delineated a comprehensive, systematic, and straightforward path to initiation, and was not based on beautiful theories, but on practical experience.⁴⁷ It issued monthly booklets written by anonymous members of the group. Upon the English publication of the first volume, comprising all of the booklets of 1927 (the first of the three years of its existence), the renowned esoteric expert Joscelyn Godwin remarked: "This is a powerful and disturbing work, and a classic. One can be quite certain that it will still have readers centuries from now."⁴⁸ The radically formulated goal of the group was "the realization of oneself, in itself, and of existence. That or nothing." This goal was understood as a transcendent *experience* — not something dependent upon divine grace, but which had to be achieved on one's own. This demanded a real struggle — a battle against one's own weaknesses — as well as asceticism (in the Greek sense of hard "practice," and not at all to be understood in a Christian-moralistic sense).

The transcendental *experience* and knowledge being striven after presupposed a transcendent, spiritual "change of one's inner being," a prior *opus transformationis*.⁴⁹ This required nothing less than a merciless transformation of one's own instinctual nature and entailed the gradual shedding of mundane traits — analogous to the traditional path through the planetary spheres in antiquity and to the *Mithras Liturgy*. According to UR, it was only such a

purification, liberation, and salvation of the soul.

⁴⁷ For details of its history and members see Hans Thomas Hakl, "Julius Evola and the Ur Group," *Aries* 12 (2012): 53-90.

⁴⁸ Statement from the back cover of the English edition of Julius Evola and the Ur Group, *Introduction to Magic*, trans. Guido Stucco, ed. Michael Moynihan (Rochester: Inner Traditions, 2000). Joscelyn Godwin also contributed considerably to the English translations in this edition.

⁴⁹ Or, as Evola put it later: "a change of one's personal condition." He even underlines "change of one's most inner nature is all that counts towards higher knowledge," in Julius Evola, *The Path of Cinnabar*, loc. cit., 89.

fundamental “mutation” that made it possible for the human being to gain access to higher transcendent realizations and experiences until one was finally able, “purely” and with open eyes, to confront the “divine” (the sphere of the “fixed stars”). It was a straight and thoroughly practical path, indeed.

Abstract-philosophical or emotional considerations were no more relevant than were “good” or “evil.” Spiritual attitudes based on a faith or philosophy could only scratch the surface. Instead, the transformation had to come on a much deeper level: “You must transform yourself. You must overcome yourself. You must make yourself whole and lift yourself up to a higher honour.”⁵⁰ The demand was not merely for self-awareness, but for self-*creation*. Only in this way could the personality get rid of the old Ego and ascend toward transcendence. Underlying this was the conviction that such a path had existed since primordial times, even if it may have repeatedly fallen into obscurity and was trodden only by solitary and often unknown “initiates.” Numerous testimonies and references from wisdom literature around the world were cited and believed to corroborate this.

The “ultimate goal” of UR was to elevate man to such a level that he transformed himself into a god. Here one might recall the statements from Meister Eckhart, which were quoted above in connection with Evola’s philosophical studies. Taken together it was an *opus contra naturam*, an operation against one’s own inner human, and dependent, passive nature — a work of liberating the body, soul, and spirit from their “natural” material characteristics. It is a goal that in Christianity might well correspond to the only unpardonable sin: the “sin against the Holy Spirit.” And few people are probably capable of seeing it as anything other than a terrible act of “hubris” against God.⁵¹

As outlined, the path to this goal began with the liberation of the self from “earthly chains.” In the first place, this concerned one’s own emotions, in particular fear, and especially the fear of death. This was described in ancient hermetic style as the struggle against the “waters” which primordially and powerfully surge against us, tearing the ground from under our feet and carrying us away if we do not develop the characteristics of “centeredness” and “Logos.” It was paramount to be a bridge pylon in the violent stream of life so that the waters could not do any harm.

⁵⁰ This and the following quotations come from the editorial in the first issue of the *UR* journal, of 1927, p. 1 f. entitled “To the Readers.”

⁵¹ Also to be kept in mind here is the “daimon” in the ancient Socratic sense, or the conversation with the “Holy Guardian Angel” in the teachings of Aleister Crowley, both of which concern a communication between the everyday I and the “higher self.” A modern psychologist would probably speak of a direct access of the I to the unconscious. The initiate in the sense of UR has, however, totally integrated his I into the “higher self.”

Another necessary step was the liberation of the self from its usual, limited self-image as a purely human being. Only in this way could one's view be opened to higher realms. The goal of the entire cleansing process – again expressed in the hermetic language preferred by Evola – was to separate the “dense” from the “subtle,” until the “inner sun,” the “gold,” the “divine spark,” or the “incorruptible core” was liberated, and formed the center of an absolute stable consciousness that was capable of becoming God. Identification with ever-higher levels of existence (sometimes symbolized by gods) is the indispensable tool for this. For only then, when one is unified with something, can one truly “know” it – in other words, know it from the inside out. Evola describes this as “active identification.” The highest “object” for active identification was the “divine spark,” the Self that must assume the place of the everyday I.⁵² At this stage one had “finally” reached the transcendent, “divine” realm. Immanence and transcendence had then become one. In the following paragraphs, I show just a few examples of how this path of deification was mentioned in the publications of UR. These examples are also chosen in a way that shows some of the sources Evola used for the metaphysical teachings of his magical group, which he naturally interpreted in his sense.

Already in the first *UR* volume one finds maybe the most basic and complete text of “deification” in antiquity: *Apathanatismos* – the “Mithras Liturgy” from the Great Magical Papyrus of Paris.⁵³ *Apathanatismos* is a technical term for the self-identification with the Deity, the immortalization and experience of salvation. The text is based on the invocation of Helios Mithras, who grants immortality through the identification with him. The following example from the text describes the identification of the initiate with the “highest Logos”:

Hail, Lord, Master of the Waters; hail, Origin of the Earth; hail Sovereign of the Spirit!

Lord, in palingenesis I die in an integrated state, and in integration I have achieved the fulfilment.

Born of animal birth, having been liberated I am transported beyond mortal generation.⁵⁴

⁵² E. A. [Julius Evola], “Come poniamo il problema della conoscenza?” in “UR – Rivista di indirizzi per una scienza dell'io” (Gennaio 1927): 22.

⁵³ *Ur* 1, no. 4 (Aprile 1927): 89-120. All translations from the Greek published in *Ur* were original and done by members of the Ur Group. The material here is chosen from the original booklets of 1927-1929. In order to present a historically accurate picture, later revisions of Evola (which were very frequent) have not been taken into account.

⁵⁴ *Ur* 1, no. 4 (Aprile 1927): 101. English text in Julius Evola and the UR Group, *Introduction to Magic*, loc. cit., 108.

It should also be noted that this translation of the *Mithras Liturgy* from the Greek was the first to ever appear in Italian, and although it can be described as academic according to the standards of the time it was issued not in an academic journal but in the esoteric booklet of a magical order. It was also equipped with a very extensive commentary. In the same volume there are extracts from Iamblichus's *De Mysteriis*, one of the highest acclaimed ancient works on theurgy. The passages that Evola chooses speak of the "uniform connection with divinity,"⁵⁵ and of rendering "the will of man adapted to the participation of the Gods," even "elevating it to them."⁵⁶ This shows clearly that there was no question of "forcing" the gods. Man should rather elevate himself to the gods.

In the second volume of *UR* (the booklets of 1928), there is a translation of verse 71 from Pythagoras's *The Golden Verses*, which says: "Thou shalt be a God, immortal, incorruptible, and Death shall have no more dominion over thee."⁵⁷ In this volume, Evola once again takes up his interest in Kirilloff, previously addressed in *Ignis* in 1925. He does so in a whole article, in which he explains his point in more detail,⁵⁸ explaining that Kirilloff discovered that there was only one way to reach the unshakable stability within oneself to be able to withstand the absence of God and that was to make oneself God. Knowing how avidly Evola studied Nietzsche, the article reminds one of the latter's words in *The Gay Science*, spoken by the mad man: "Do we not ourselves have to become gods merely to appear worthy [of killing them]?"⁵⁹

For the third volume of *UR*, in which its name was changed to *KRUR*, just a short selection of pertinent quotes is possible. Interestingly, Evola again chooses a classic text — this time from the Renaissance — to find a confirmation for his magical (or was it a theurgical?) path to "becoming God": Giovanni Pico della Mirandola's *Oration on the Dignity of Man*, out of which two passages quoted by Evola are selected here:

We have made you a creature neither of heaven nor of earth, neither mortal nor immortal, in order that you may, as the free and proud shaper of your own being, fashion yourself in the form you may prefer. It will be in your power to descend

⁵⁵ *Ur* 1, no. 11–12 (Novembre, Dicembre 1927): 325.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 326. The English translations of these passages are taken from the English edition of Julius Evola and the UR Group, *Introduction to Magic*, loc. cit., 330, and 331.

⁵⁷ "The Golden Verses of Pythagoras," Sacred Texts, accessed September 9, 2018, <http://sacred-texts.com/cla/gvp/gvp03.htm>.

⁵⁸ "Kirilloff and Initiation," *Ur* 2, no. 6 (Giugno 1928): 187–92.

⁵⁹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, Book 3, part 125, ed. Bernard Williams, trans. Josefine Nauckhoff (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 120. Accessed September 9, 2018, www.holybooks.com/the-gay-science-friedrich-nietzsche/.

to the lower, brutish forms of life; you will be able, through your own decision, to rise again to the superior orders whose life is divine.” [...]

And if, dissatisfied with the lot of all creatures, he should recollect himself into the center of his own unity, he will there become one spirit with God, in the solitary darkness of the Father, Who is set above all things, himself transcends all creatures.⁶⁰

In another essay in this volume, “Il meccanismo della coscienza” [The Mechanics of Consciousness], Evola quotes the following passage from Agrippa’s *Occult Philosophy* in order to corroborate his point of view:⁶¹

let us, ascending to the intellectual life, and simple sight, behold the intelligible essence with individual and simple precepts, that we may attain to the highest being of the soul, by which we are one, and under which our multitude is united. Therefore, let us attain to the first unity, from whom there is a union in all things, through that one which is as the flower of our essence: which then at length we attain to, when avoiding all multitude, we do arise into our very unity, are made one, and act uniformly.⁶²

The next quotation is taken from a ten-page collection of aphorisms by Plotinus, most probably selected by Evola himself, under the title “Precepts of Pagan Wisdom”: “It is for the Gods to come to me and not for me to go to them” – a phrase that had been repeatedly quoted by Evola in several books and essays.⁶³ In his commentary to this saying Evola affirms: “One must create within oneself a quality by which the transcendental powers (the gods) are *compelled* to come...” He continues with the next aphorism taken from the *Enneads*: “For one must become similar to the Gods, not to the Good.”⁶⁴ Evola explains: “A god is not a ‘moral model’. He is a totally *different* being.”⁶⁵ Therefore, initiation is a radical transformation from one level of being to another.

⁶⁰ KRUR 1, 3 (Marzo 1927): 89. An English translation may be found here: Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, *Oration on the Dignity of Man*, The University of Adelaide, accessed September 9, 2018, https://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/p/pico_della_mirandola/giovanni/dignity/.

⁶¹ Henry Cornelius Agrippa, *Occult Philosophy*, vol. 3, 55, in Apro, “Il meccanismo della coscienza,” KRUR 1, no. 3 (Marzo 1929): 98. Apro is probably the pseudonym of the famous Italian psychoanalyst Emilio Servadio, who also was a member of UR, but was not active in magical rituals.

⁶² Translation accessed at: Henry Cornelius Agrippa, *Occult Philosophy*, Book 3 (part 4), Esoteric Archives, accessed September 9, 2018, <http://www.esotericarchives.com/agrippa/agripp3d.htm>.

⁶³ Porphyry, *On the Life of Plotinus*, 10, in ‘Plotino “Massime di sagesza pagana”’, KRUR 5 (Maggio 1929): 129.

⁶⁴ Plotinus, *Enneads*, I, II, 7. Translation from the Italian version by Ur.

⁶⁵ KRUR 5 (Maggio 1929): 130.

The Hermetic Tradition

Alchemy, or as Evola terms it in his book dedicated to the subject, *The Hermetic Tradition*,⁶⁶ is another tradition of that ancient (and, according to Evola, worldwide) art of transforming man into God, which Evola wants to teach. In his spiritual autobiography Evola writes:

The various alchemical operations are essentially concerned with the initiatory transformation of the human being. Alchemical “gold” is a metaphor for the immortal and invulnerable being, here conceived in terms of the [...] theory of conditioned immortality, which is to say: not as a given, but rather as something which is to be obtained by means of a secret procedure.⁶⁷

The basic ideas of this book had previously been set out over several issues of the *UR* and *KRUR* booklets: the book simply forms them into a coherent whole. Nevertheless, it is a comprehensive and detailed text that contains hundreds of quotations taken from classical alchemical and hermetic works, with which Evola seeks to support his path to the “Stone of the Philosophers,” which symbolizes immortality, liberation, and *becoming God*.⁶⁸ This book is perhaps his best-documented work to illustrate his path of “deification.”

Again, a number of passages from *The Hermetic Tradition* indicate Evola’s sources:

Between the eternal birth, the process of restoration after the fall, and the process of the wise with their philosophers’ stone, there is no point of difference, because it is all resurrected in the eternal birth and all must have a restoration in the same fashion.⁶⁹

For Jacob Böhme (1575–1624), birth in the eternal as well as reinstatement in the primordial condition of divinity after the great “fall,” and the process of the stone of the wise, are one and the same procedure of spiritual perfection. This is exactly what Evola means when he links the alchemical process with the Hermetic Tradition, and also with “high” magic (in his special sense as given in *UR/KRUR*). The goal is always to transform the un-liberated, earthly

⁶⁶ Julius Evola, *La tradizione ermetica* (Bari: Laterza & Figli, 1931). For the English translation of the third edition published in 1971 (revised by Evola), see: Julius Evola, *The Hermetic Tradition*, trans. E. E. Rehmus (Rochester: Inner Traditions International, 1995).

⁶⁷ Julius Evola, *The Path of Cinnabar*, 119.

⁶⁸ For an overview and explanatory notes on its symbology see Hans Thomas Hakl, “The Symbology of Hermeticism in the Work of Julius Evola,” in *Lux in Tenebris*, ed. by Peter Forshaw (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 334–63.

⁶⁹ Jacob Böhme, *De Signatura Rerum* (Amsterdam: Gichtel, 1682), chapter 7, §78, §70, quoted by Evola, *La tradizione ermetica*, op. cit., 7.

human into a god (*deificatio*) — not merely similar to a god — and to make him immortal. For this reason, Evola represents Alchemy not as a specialty field, “which preoccupies itself with the metals and their correspondences in man, but as a complete, all-encompassing, physical and metaphysical system.”⁷⁰

Thus, the work of Alchemy for Evola is above all an inner transformation of the state of consciousness of the alchemist, which first lifts him to a “higher” plane, from which position he “stands over” and rules things. This is possible because of the “double nature” of man. He quotes from the *Corpus Hermeticum*:

Man loses no worthiness for possessing a mortal part, but very much on the contrary, mortality augments his possibility and his power. His double functions are possible for him precisely because of his double nature: because he is so constituted that it is possible for him to embrace both the divine and the terrestrial at the same time.⁷¹

Further on one finds another quotation, also from the *Corpus Hermeticum* (out of nearly thirty in the whole book):

So let us not be afraid to tell the truth. The true man is above them [the celestial gods], or at least equal to them. For no god leaves his sphere to come to earth, whereas man ascends to heaven and measures it. Let us dare to say that a man is a mortal god and a celestial god is an immortal man.⁷²

Two quotations from classical alchemical works further confirm Evola’s outlook:

The soul calls out to the illuminated body: Wake up from Hades! Resurrect from the tomb! Come out alive from the darkness! Indeed, you have recovered the spiritual and divine state.⁷³

Further on we find:

When man shall have been glorified, his body will become like the angelic body in this respect. If we carefully cultivate the life of our souls, we shall be sons and heirs of God, and shall be able to do that which now seems impossible.⁷⁴

⁷⁰ H. T. Hansen (a.k.a. Hans Thomas Hakl), “Foreword,” *The Hermetic Tradition*, op. cit., vii.

⁷¹ Julius Evola, *La tradizione ermetica*, op. cit., 200.

⁷² Julius Evola, *La tradizione ermetica*, op. cit., 24. Both English translations are from Julius Evola, *The Hermetic Tradition*, op. cit., 11.

⁷³ Julius Evola, *La tradizione ermetica*, op. cit. 202. An English translation of this text may be found at: “Greek Alchemy,” KIA Magic, accessed September 10, 2018, http://kiamagic.com/wiki/index.php/Greek_Alchemy.

⁷⁴ Basilus Valentinus, *The Twelve Keys*, Key 7, accessed September 10, 2018 <http://www.crys->

One of the main inspirations for Evola's understanding of Alchemy was Cesare della Riviera (the exact dates of his birth and death are unknown, although presumably he lived between 1560 and 1630). Evola republished his work *Il mondo magico de gli heroi* as a modernized version with a foreword.⁷⁵ According to this text, the hermetic "fire" had to be transformed from the downward-directed, earthly fire of sexuality into the upward-directed, "divine" fire. In this way the elements of earth were transformed so that they could form the "transcendent" human, or as Cesare della Riviera expressed it, in order "to shift the heroes to heaven by divine wisdom and to make them lords of the magical universe."⁷⁶

Buddhism and, Again, Tantrism

The next tradition that Evola tackled in order to evaluate the possibility of gaining absolute liberation and salvation was Buddhism. In 1949, when presenting the new and completely revised edition of his Tantric book *L'uomo come potenza* [*Man as Power*], mentioned earlier in this article, he said the following about his Buddhist work, which had been published six years earlier:

In our book, *La dottrina del risveglio* [*The Doctrine of Awakening*],⁷⁷ we have based on the teachings of the original Buddhism expounded the methods peculiar to a path purely and olympically ascetic, where the detachment in the highest virile and aristocratic sense, devoid of any devout effusion and devoid of any mythologizing but full of a precise, scientific conscience is shown as the main instrument for the reintegration of the individual into the spiritual and transcendent reality.

Whereas in Tantrism:

we are dealing with a liberation not to be realized only through detachment and the enucleation of a "sidereal" element, but by affirming and assimilating forces of the becoming, of life and the body itself, that is to say through an element which one could call "telluric," and by bringing it finally to a potency and a transfiguration in order to reach the same goal as in the other path.⁷⁸

talinks.com/basilvalentine.html, quoted in Julius Evola, *La tradizione ermetica*, op. cit., 201.

⁷⁵ Cesare della Riviera, *Il Mondo Magico degli Heroi* (Bari: Laterza & Figli, 1932). The original edition was Padua, per Francesco Osanna, 1603.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 25.

⁷⁷ Julius Evola, *La dottrina del risveglio* (Bari: Laterza & Figli, 1943).

⁷⁸ Julius Evola, *Lo Yoga della Potenza — Saggio sui Tantra* (Milano: Fratelli Bocca, 1949), 15.

By writing *The Doctrine of Awakening*, it was Evola's intention to repay a debt to the figure of Buddha, one of whose sayings had prevented him from committing suicide immediately after his return from the First World War. In *The Path of Cinnabar* Evola even affirms: "At a later date, I came to employ Buddhist texts daily as a means to develop a detached awareness of 'being'."⁷⁹ He goes on to explain that the "essential nature of Buddhist doctrine was metaphysical and initiatory." And that

Buddhism was rather born of a will to attain the unconditioned, a will that was radically affirmed by seeking to attain what transcends life and death. It was not so much "pain" that Buddhism seeks to overcome, as the agitation and contingency implied by all conditioned existence, which has its origin, root and foundation in greed: a thirst which, by its very nature, cannot be extinguished by leading an ordinary life.⁸⁰

Evola's perspective on the goal of Buddhism is very clear. He concentrates on Buddhism in its original form (i.e., on so-called Pali-Buddhism; Theravada or Hinayana-Buddhism) and rarely talks about the more widely spread Mahayana-Buddhism. Buddha's mercy for all beings is not his topic, but he explains:

An aspiration towards the unconditioned leads the Buddhist ascetic beyond Being and beyond the god of Being; beyond the very bliss of celestial heavens, which the ascetic views as a binding force – for the hierarchies of the traditional, popular deities are seen as parts of the finite, contingent world to be transcended. In Buddhist texts it is frequently written that: "He (i.e. the ascetic) has transcended this world and the world beyond, the human bond, and the divine bond: for both bonds he has broken". The ultimate goal of Buddhism, therefore, the Great Liberation, perfectly coincides with that of the purest metaphysical tradition, and coincides with the supersubstantial apex, both anterior and superior to being and non-being, and to any personal "creator" god.⁸¹

Evola also wants to underline a minor goal in his book:

How at least part of these disciplines for self-realization can be pursued while leading an ordinary life, as a way of strengthening one's inner character, of achieving detachment, and of establishing something invulnerable and indestructible within oneself.⁸²

⁷⁹ Julius Evola, *Il cammino del cinabro*, loc. cit., 153. English translation from Evola, *The Path of Cinnabar*, loc. cit., 157.

⁸⁰ Julius Evola, *The Path of Cinnabar*, loc. cit., 158; Italian original, loc. cit., 153.

⁸¹ *Ibid*, 159; Italian original, loc. cit., 154-55.

⁸² *Ibid*, 160; Italian original, loc. cit., 155.

When describing those who have achieved the highest aim of Buddhism, the words of the *Doctrine of the Awakening* are explicit:

Having destroyed the roots of the mania of the “I”, for them the net of illusion has been burned. Their heart is transparent with light, they are divine beings [...] “Supreme are those who are awakened!” Invincible and intact beings, they appear as “sublime supermen”.

And describing the Awakened:

He has touched the depths of the element free from death. He has abandoned the human bond and he has overcome the divine bond and he is freed from all bonds. The path of him who can be conquered by none in the world and whose dominion is the infinite, is not known to the gods, nor to the angels, nor to men.⁸³

For Evola, Buddhism, as opposed to a “religion,” is much more a detailed and long-time proven system to achieve initiation into higher realms of being through asceticism and spiritual exercises. When discussing asceticism however, Evola warns immediately that he does not mean anything like “mortification of the flesh and painful renunciation of the world,”⁸⁴ practiced in the hope of reconciliation with an omnipotent Creator who grants “salvation.”

Buddhist ascetic rules or spiritual disciplines thus represent for him a clear-cut and straightforward system, quite similar to a training program according to our modern mentality. As Evola points out:

Buddhist techniques might be described as scientific, for they take account of each step in the path to self-realization, and of the organic links existing between each phase of the ascetic process.⁸⁵

Buddhism needs no faith, and no priests, but rather knowledge and perseverance. For Evola, this gives it a genuinely universal character, which means that it should not be regarded as a specific Eastern religion. He maintains that in theory Buddhist precepts can thus be grafted onto any religion. And that was perhaps the main reason why he was so attracted by these teachings and wrote *The Doctrine of Awakening*. Evola, whose principal aim in all his studies was to find a path to transcendence for the man of today, saw in Buddhism by far the best possible system to attain the

⁸³ The last two quotations are from Julius Evola, *The Doctrine of Awakening*, trans. H. E. Musson (London: Luzac & Company, 1951), 262–63; Italian original: Julius Evola, *La dottrina del risveglio*, loc. cit., 287–88.

⁸⁴ *Op. cit.*, 4.

⁸⁵ Evola, *The Path of Cinnabar*, 160; Italian original, loc. cit., 155.

aspired spiritual enlightenment and liberation from the — for him — “decadent” world of today, characterized by materialism and egoism. He also underlined the fact that Buddhism possessed “texts and teachings available to all and that it is not an esoteric school with its knowledge reserved for a restricted number of initiates.”⁸⁶

The Doctrine of Awakening is therefore written with the specific aim to provide an eminently practical, exact, and detailed guide through the necessary exercises, meditations, and spiritual stages up to the ultimate goal of nirvāna (Pali: *nibbāna* = cessation of restlessness), as given in Buddhist texts. Evola describes this path in a succinct way in his major work *Rivolta contro il mondo moderno* [*Revolt Against the Modern World*] when defining his concept of asceticism, which means stripping the nucleus of consciousness from all mundane conditionings:

Once all the dross and obstructions are removed (*opus remotiois*), participation in the overworld takes place in the form of a vision or enlightenment [...] this point also represents at the same time the beginning of a truly continuous, progressive ascent that realizes states of being truly superior to the human condition. The essential elements [...] are the universal as knowledge and knowledge as liberation. [...] to turn the knowledge of the ultimate non-identity of the Self with anything “else” into a fire that progressively devours any irrational self-identification with anything that is conditioned. [...] The final outcome [...] is *bodhi*, which is knowledge in the eminent sense of superrational enlightenment or liberating knowledge, as in “waking up” from sleep, slumber, or a hallucination. [...] Buddha’s doctrine is permeated by a sense of superiority, clarity, and an indomitable spirit, and Buddha himself is called “the fully Self-Awakened One”, “the Lord.”⁸⁷

It may have been this particularly clear and straightforward exposition that prompted Joscelyn Godwin to call *The Doctrine of Awakening* “one of [Evola’s] best books, by any standard.”⁸⁸ Evola’s practical, or even “technical,” approach is also shown by the fact that from the very beginning of the text he underlines the necessity to destroy the “demon of dialectics.” Instead of constructing theories, dealing with speculations, and expressing mere opinions, one should rather concentrate one’s efforts on direct experience. Evola quotes the *Majjhima-nikāya* (140): “He who has overcome all opinion, o disciples, is called a saint, one who knows.”⁸⁹

⁸⁶ Evola, *The Doctrine of Awakening*, *op. cit.*, 9.

⁸⁷ Julius Evola, *Rivolta contro il mondo moderno* (Milano: Ulrico Hoepli, 1934), 152–57. English text: Julius Evola, *Revolt against the Modern World*, trans. Guido Stucco (Rochester: Inner Traditions, 1995), 111–15.

⁸⁸ Joscelyn Godwin, “Julius Evola: A Philosopher for the Age of the Titans,” *TYR* 1 (2002): 135.

⁸⁹ Evola, *The Doctrine of Awakening*, *op. cit.*, 38.

Tantrism and its relation to deification has already been a large topic in this essay when discussing Evola's *Man as Power*. In 1949, a nominal "second edition" of this work was published, but it was essentially a new book with the text almost completely rewritten, new material added (on Tantric Buddhism), and its focus heavily shifted. The title was also changed to *Lo Yoga della potenza* [*The Yoga of Power*], although Evola later said that the old title was better suited because Yoga was only one part of the text's subject. Evola's former attempt to combine his Magical Idealism with an Eastern practical path to liberation was now completely dismissed. Evola himself writes in his spiritual autobiography of "a shift of emphasis away from the notion of power."⁹⁰ According to him, using the term *maha-shakti* to indicate the Supreme Principle is somewhat misleading, because this highest principle should be "best described as that which — like Plotinus' One — embraces all possibilities." He continues:

Just as *Shakti* is dynamic, productive, and changing, so *Shiva* is immobile, luminous, and detached. Just as in Hindu cosmology, the union of *Shiva* and *Shakti* engenders the universe so the mystery of the inner transformation of the human being and the highest principle of freedom are described as the union, within man, of the two principles — rather than as a self-abandonment to the pure unrestrained power of *Shakti*.⁹¹

This is a major shift indeed from female power to androgyny as key to the "mystery of the inner transformation of the human being." By doing this Evola also wanted "to banish all forms of 'titanic,' pandemic and chaotically ecstatic deviation," where man remains basically at the same existential level. Therefore, he pointed out that the Tantric system is based on a crucial premise: the presence of a "transformative" and mystical element, and of a kind of *metanoia* (or change of polarity).⁹²

Evola saw another danger in his first Tantric work, actually already extant in his philosophical work, in

the erroneous idea of a continuous development in time (a kind of "progression" [...] of a development of almost possessing eschatological overtones).⁹³

On the contrary, Evola sought

to emphasize the idea of a sudden jump to a different existential level, a return to the doctrine of multiple levels of being, and a change of polarity.⁹⁴

⁹⁰ Evola, *The Path of Cinnabar*, loc. cit., 73; Italian original, loc. cit., 75.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 73; Italian original loc. cit., 76.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 75; Italian original loc. cit., 78.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 75; Italian original loc. cit., 78.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 75; Italian original loc. cit., 78.

Evola confessed openly in his autobiography that it had taken him some time even after having finished his work on Tantrism to understand this fundamental difference, and that he only gradually came to define these central points with due clarity.

In conclusion to this section I want to quote one passage in the new edition of 1949 that is relevant to our topic: “Moreover it is a Tantric notion that one cannot adore a god without ‘becoming’ that God.”⁹⁵ In the third revised edition, the last completed by Evola personally, he inserts another quotation from the *Tantratattva* 1:27:

Reasoning, argument, and inference may be the work of other schools (*shastras*), but the work of the Tantra is to accomplish superhuman and divine events through the force of their own words (*mantras*).⁹⁶

Conclusion

There is one fundamental assumption in Evola’s esoteric work: that genuine traditions conceal and can even convey a “higher” form of supra-rational knowledge. That such a superior knowledge above poetic or artistic metaphors or symbols could “really” exist has generally been fiercely disputed by academic science, if one disregards certain academics of a “traditional” bent. But things are changing. I quote a few sentences from an article by Wouter Hanegraaff from 2008. Hanegraaff is long-standing professor for the History of Hermetic Philosophy and Related Currents at the University of Amsterdam and known for his empirical and historical methodology. In his article he argues that

the authors of the hermetic corpus assumed a sequential hierarchy of “levels of knowledge”, in which the highest and most profound knowledge (gnosis) is attained only during ecstatic or “altered” states of consciousness that transcend rationality. While the hermetic teachings have often been described as unsystematic, inconsistent, incoherent or confused, in fact they are grounded in a precise and carefully formulated doctrine of how the hermetic initiate may move from the domain of mere rational discourse to the attainment of several “trans-rational” stages of direct experiential knowledge, and thereby from the limited and temporal domain of material reality to the unlimited and eternal of Mind.⁹⁷

⁹⁵ Evola, *Lo yoga della potenza* (Roma: Edizioni Mediterranee, 1972), op. cit., 22. English translation in Julius Evola, *The Yoga of Power*, op. cit., 12.

⁹⁶ Evola, *Lo yoga della potenza*, 11. English translation in Evola, *The Yoga of Power*, op. cit. 2.

⁹⁷ Wouter J. Hanegraaff, “Altered States of Knowledge: The Attainment of Gnosis in the Hermetica,” *The International Journal of Platonic Tradition* 2 (2008): 128–63.

Hanegraaff defends the position of the quoted unknown authors and concludes:

My final argument in favour of a Hermetic “hierarchy of knowledge” – reflected in a sequence of texts that describe a progress through successive levels of initiation – is, quite simply, that it does better justice to the sources than the alternatives, and that it allows for an amount of inter-textual consistency and internal logic which does not implicitly offend the intelligence of its presumed authors, editors, compilers and readers.⁹⁸

Naturally, such a form of knowledge goes far beyond Kant’s views on the limits of the human cognitive faculties and the strict concatenation of our thinking and understanding to a specific historical period. It is, as Hanegraaff would say, “essentialist.”

Another important intellectual position in all of Evola’s religious and esoteric writings is his belief in the basic unity of all genuine metaphysical and spiritual traditions, an idea he inherited from René Guénon. This leads him to explain one tradition by another, elucidating a difficult text of one tradition with analogous but clearer passages from totally different ones.

In his *Doctrine of Awakening*, for instance, he draws parallels to Tantrism,⁹⁹ Taoism, and Alchemy and quotes from Gustav Meyrink’s novel *Golem* just as from the Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius if he wants to make a point. And, in many cases, his surprising intuition and broad knowledge of different traditions leads to new and valid interpretations of formerly obscure texts, as even religious scholars have had to admit.¹⁰⁰ But this does not and cannot mean that Evola should be regarded as a genuine academic scholar, because his methodology greatly differs from current university standards. Nevertheless, in several cases he has certainly contributed to academic knowledge. For instance, he was the first researcher to bring Tantrism, as well as a new approach to Alchemy, to the Italian public, and he was one of the first Italian writers to write on Zen Buddhism.¹⁰¹ His pioneering role in these fields has been acknowledged by intellectuals such as Mircea Eliade (1907–1986) and Carl Gustav Jung (1875–1961).

⁹⁸ *Ibid.* 136.

⁹⁹ In Tantrism Evola saw a “wet” path to liberation, as opposed to Buddhism, which he defined as a “dry” path because of its intellectual detachment.

¹⁰⁰ See, for instance, Silvio Vita, “Il ‘Tao-tê-ching’ di Julius Evola: dalla filosofia alla tradizione,” in Julius Evola, *Tao Tê Ching di Lao-tze* (Roma: Edizioni Mediterranee, 1997), 23.

¹⁰¹ Just prior to his death, Evola also translated the first volume of Deisetz Teitaro Suzuki’s *Essays on Zen Buddhism*. Deisetz Teitaro Suzuki, *Saggi sul Buddhismo Zen*, trans. Julius Evola (Roma: Edizioni Mediterranee, 1975).

His ideas and his writings never pretended to be neutral in the academic sense, but were always “biased” by his specific worldview, or even ideology. He was not interested in being a pure scholar, providing some kind of new information. Evola wanted to *change* the world. Evola’s aim in writing was always a “pedagogic” or rather “anagogic” (leading upwards) one. What he wanted was to “educate” the readers in order to lead them towards transcendence or to “become gods” in his specific sense. This holds true not only for his religious or esoteric research but for all his work, be it in philosophy, art, or even politics and racial theories. His opponents may call this a flight into irrationalism, but this is vehemently contradicted by Thomas Sheehan, a scholar of religious studies and philosopher at Stanford University, who writes:

Evola’s assertion of supra-rational over the rational is emphatically not a flight to a supra-sensible Beyond but always remains inner-worldly. As he [Evola] puts it, from within life itself one attains a superiority over life. Evola’s supra-rational *nous* does not remove man from the world.¹⁰²

A third fundamental and consistent factor in all of Evola’s metaphysical and practical approach to religions and esotericism is his concept of initiation, which was for him a hallmark of all genuine traditional spirituality. He defines initiation as a factual transition to a higher world, which in its turn presupposes the possibility for man to live in various existential modes (both higher and lower). Evola teaches, as we have seen, the ascending path with its goal of the “Great Liberation” and the extraordinary possibility of immortality.¹⁰³ In order to achieve his task, Evola developed a concept of self-initiation that stood in sharp contrast to René Guénon’s idea that only traditional orders with a chain of initiates could confer a valid and real initiation. As Evola, however, deemed it nearly impossible for Westerners to enter into contact with such orders, his teachings tried to supply the basic principles that would enable an individual to conquer the transcendent realms with his own forces: a path naturally open only to a very limited number of gifted and dedicated individuals.

¹⁰² Thomas Sheehan, “Diventare Dio: Julius Evola and the Metaphysics of Fascism,” *loc. cit.*, 285.

¹⁰³ Julius Evola, *L’arco e la clava* (Milano: Scheiwiller, 1968), 99. English translation: Julius Evola, *The Bow and the Club*, trans. by Sergio Knipe (London: Arkos, 2018), 130.

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Between Judaism and Freemasonry The Dual Interpretation of David Rosenberg's Kabbalistic Lithograph, *Aperçu de l'Origine du Culte Hébraïque* (1841)

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Abstract

The article addresses a highly detailed and complex lithograph with the title *Aperçu de l'Origine du Culte Hébraïque* ("Survey of the Origin of the Hebrew Worship"), which was designed and executed in Paris in 1841 by a Hungarian rabbi, David Rosenberg. The iconographic programme of the elaborate print, also conceived by the rabbi, is based on the Kabbalistic understanding of the system of the universe and Judaism, and is presented in an explicative booklet to the lithograph.

However, in a separate publication Rabbi Rosenberg offered a different interpretation: a Masonic reading of the tableau, in which the symbolic numbers of Kabbalah and the various scenes in the lithograph were associated with the symbols, degrees, office-bearers, and ceremonies of Freemasonry, including the physical arrangement of the Masonic lodge and its furnishing. Thereby the rabbi wished to prove that Freemasonry originated with the Hebrews. The true protagonist in both readings is the divine order, embodied in the universal harmony and the laws of nature, which manifested itself in Judaism, the source of Freemasonry.

The article explains the Kabbalistic meaning of the lithograph and its application to Freemasonry. Rosenberg's endeavour will be analysed within the wider Masonic historical context. The probable reasons behind the reinterpretation of the lithograph from a Judaic into a Masonic work will be explored, including Rosenberg's possible personal motives. It will be argued that the rabbi used Kabbalah as a tool to gain higher recognition within the Masonic lodge.

Keywords

David Rosenberg, Kabbalah, Freemasonry, Art, Iconography, Jewish-Christian Relations

Rabbi David Rosenberg—Artist and Freemason

Rabbi David Rosenberg was an artist, a scribe, and a Freemason who made a number of Kabbalistic-Masonic lithographs, complemented by his explications. Among other things, he published almanacs and contributed to Masonic publications and journals. Rosenberg was born in Tokaj, Hungary in 1793. In his early twenties he moved to London, and then, for ten years, he lived in Oldenburg (Grand Duchy of Oldenburg, German Empire). In the community of about eighty Jews, Rosenberg was a teacher, a reader (*Vorleser*), a *shamash*, a *shochet* and a scribe.¹ He was intent on opening a drawing school for poor children, and although his request for a licence was rejected, he gave private drawing lessons.

Rosenberg's most important years as a Freemason and most productive years as a lithographer were connected to Paris.² As attested by the files of various Masonic lodges and the French police, Rosenberg was living in Paris already in the early 1830s. To supplement his slender means, he time and again presented his works in lodges and offered them for sale. Although he failed to obtain a licence for a lithographic press in 1835, he managed to secure an assistant position at the Royal Library, most probably through his Masonic connections.³

Rosenberg became admitted to the Lodge *Les Chevaliers Croisés* ('The Knights of the Cross'), where he rapidly advanced within the Masonic hierarchy, and in 1838 the rabbi became a Templar.⁴ His remarkably fast career ascent, still not explored in full detail, is so much the more astonishing as this lodge was a very aristocratic one. In the 1840s, thirteen out of its twenty-three members were adorned with titles: a prince, two dukes, six counts, three marquises, and a baron, amongst them notables of the July Monarchy and a peer of France.⁵

The majority of Rosenberg's works were created in these years, including the one which is the subject of this article: *Aperçu de l'Origine du Culte Hébraïque* ('Survey of the Origin of the Hebrew Worship').⁶ (See fig. 1.) The lithograph

¹ Leo Trepp, *Die Oldenburger Judenschaft. Bild und Vorbild jüdischen Seins und Werdens in Deutschland* (Oldenburg: Heinz Holzberg Verlag, 1973), 56.

² Jean-Pierre Brach and Pierre Mollier, "Kabbale et Franc-Maçonnerie : les planches théosophico-maçonniques du Frère David Rosenberg (circa 1830)," *Renaissance Traditionnelle*, no. 143–144 (July–October 2005): 204–13.

³ *Ibid.*, 208–10.

⁴ A degree in a high degree system of Freemasonry. Cf. Pierre Mollier, "Freemasonry and Templarism," in *Handbook of Freemasonry*, eds. Henrik Bogdan and J. A. M. Snoek (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 82–99.

⁵ Brach and Mollier, "Kabbale et Franc-Maçonnerie," 210–11.

⁶ Jewish Museum London, "Kabbalistic *Mizrach*," C 1986.7.10, paper, coloured lithograph, dimensions: 889 mm (h) x 631 mm (w). Image courtesy of the Jewish Museum London.

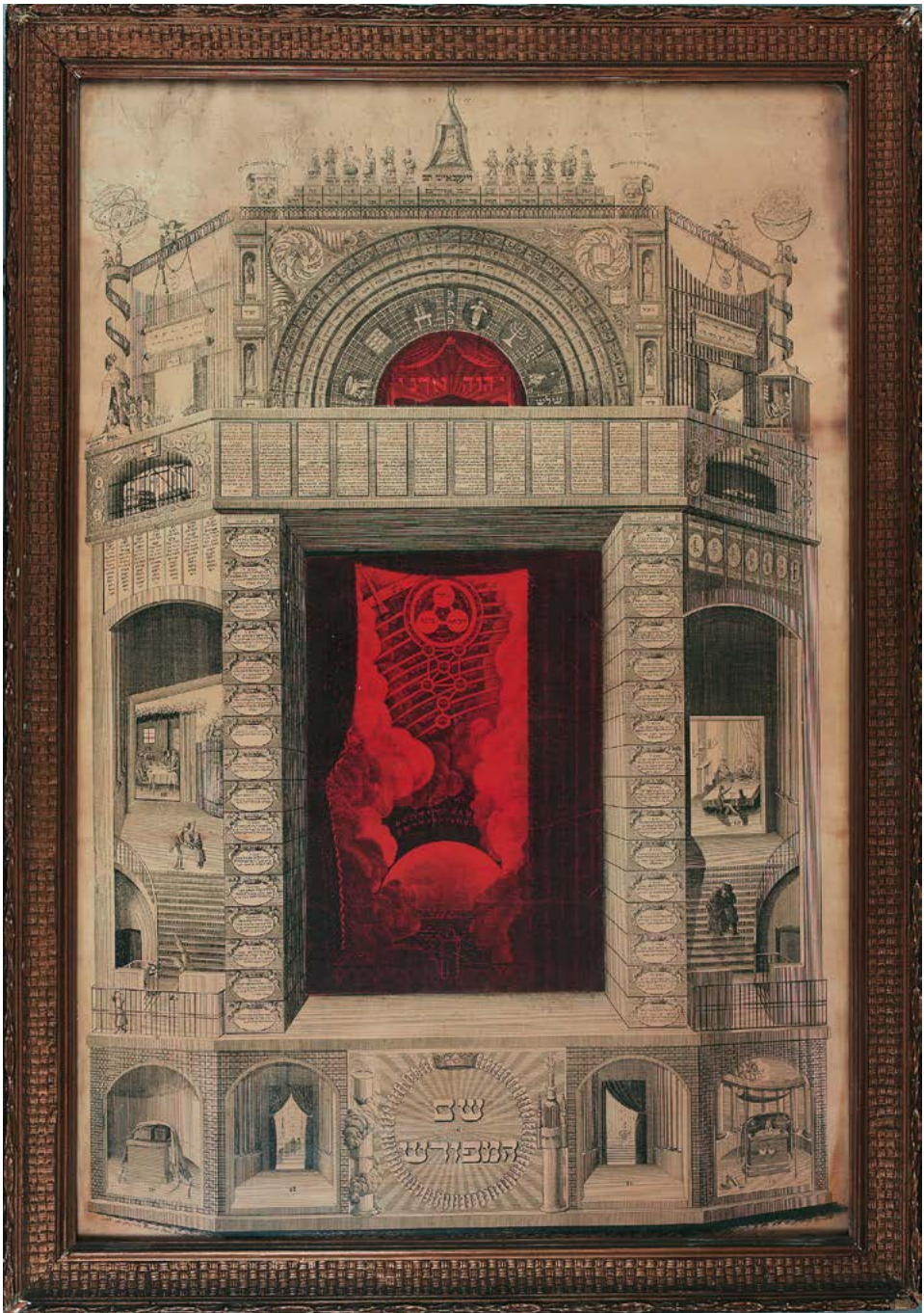


Figure 1. David Rosenberg, *Aperçu de l'Origine du Culte Hébraïque*, 1841.

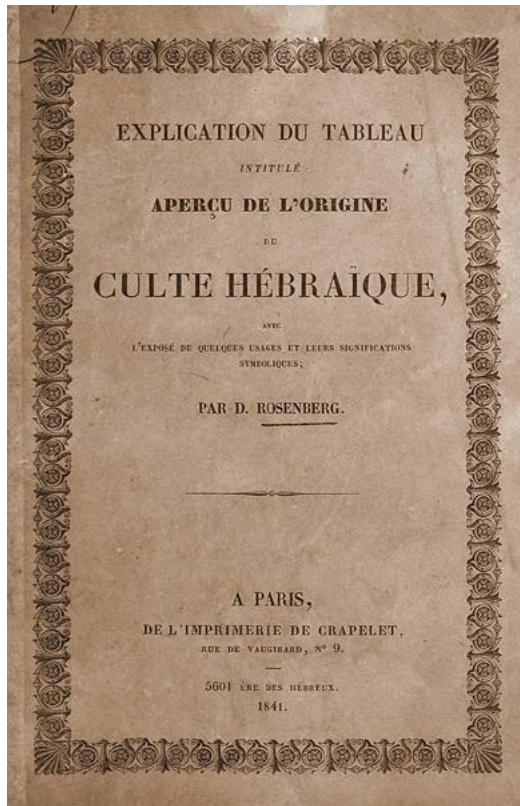


Figure 2. David Rosenberg, *Explication*, 1841—title page.

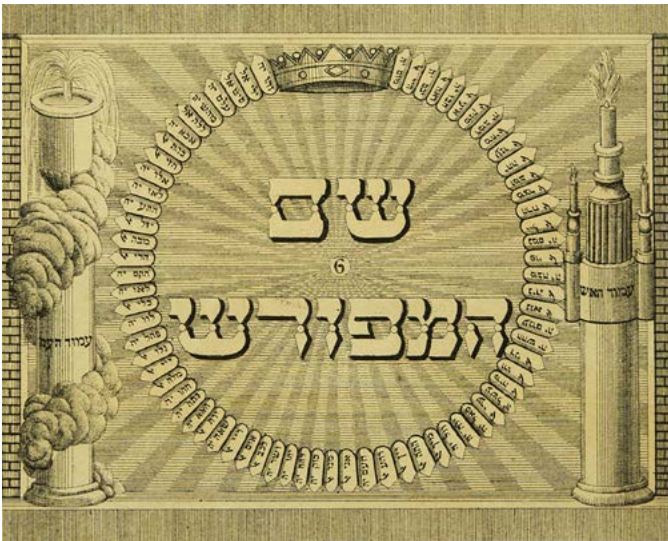


Figure 3. *Shem haMephorash* & Jachin and Boaz (detail).

was published in 1841 together with a seventy-page explicatory book titled: *Explication du tableau intitulé : Aperçu de l'Origine du Culte Hébraïque, avec l'exposé de quelques usages et leurs significations symboliques* ('Explication of the tableau entitled: Survey of the Origin of the Hebrew Worship, with presentation of certain usages and their symbolic meanings').⁷ (See fig. 2.) As the title suggests, the lithograph and the booklet deal exclusively with Judaism.

The Kabbalistic Lithograph

The ornately decorated architectural construct of the artwork is an allegorical representation of the Temple of the Universe (see fig. 1). The edifice is broken up by a remarkable array of openings, on various levels, and by a plethora of other architectural details. The central opening, which resembles the proscenium of a theatre stage, is framed with texts in a frieze-like row of blocks and medallions, topped by an arch, and surrounded with a multitude of recesses containing narrative scenes. The whole composition is populated with figures, Jewish religious items, and overbound with Kabbalistic symbols.

The Jewish Museum London describes and refers to the lithograph as a "Kabbalistic *Mizrach*." The word *mizrach* (מִזְרַח) means "east," literally "the splendour of the rising sun,"⁸ and indicates the direction of prayer: towards the Temple of Jerusalem. It is also an acronym of מִצַּד זֶה רוּחַ חַיִּים, meaning "from this direction the spirit of life."⁹ In Ashkenazi Jewish homes the custom of hanging *mizrach* plaques can be traced back to the eighteenth century, and papercuts were the most popular genre.¹⁰

⁷ Paris: L'imprimerie de Crapelet, 5061 ère de hébreux, 1841. The lithograph was reproduced without mentioning Rosenberg in Z'ev ben Shimon Halevi, *Kabbalah: Tradition of Hidden Knowledge* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1979), 55. Rosenberg's work was translated into English in the United States by Max Wolff who republished it in New York in 1859 with the title, *Origin of the Rites and Worship of the Hebrews*. The accompanying book, amended by Wolff with his own remarks and notes, bears the title: *Explication of an Engraving Called the Origin of the Rites and Worship of the Hebrews; Together with Remarks on Creation, and a Brief Account on Some Observances and Their Symbolical Signification. From the Original French of D. Rosenberg, of Paris* (New York: Office of the Jewish Messenger, 1859; 2n edition: New York: J. A. H. Hasbrouck & Co. Printers and Stationers, 1861). The US edition of the work will be dealt with in a forthcoming article by the author. (The quotations from the original French work will be given in Wolff's translation.)

⁸ The verb לִירוֹחַ (from the root ז.ר.ח) means to shine, to dawn, to glow, to illuminate.

⁹ Joseph and Yehudit Shadur, *Traditional Jewish Papercuts: An Inner World of Art and Symbol* (Hanover & London: University Press of New England, 2002), 106.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 57.

And indeed, although the word ‘מִזְרָח’ does not appear on the lithograph, it is tempting to situate the artwork within this category of Jewish religious art for several reasons. Rosenberg himself produced a Kabbalistic-Masonic *mizrach* table in 1834 (*Le Miroir de la Sagesse*), where the word ‘מִזְרָח’ is clearly displayed on a structurally similar edifice. Central to these visual “compasses for the heart” is the Temple symbolism:¹¹ the building, its implements, the Temple worship, and the city of Jerusalem as well.¹² There are numerous allusions, both overt and covert, to the Temple of Solomon. The architectural structure is a plausible pictorial allusion to the Temple in Jerusalem (e.g. Wolff himself refers to it in his Editor’s Preface as an allegory with the form of the Temple¹³), and as such it readily offers an association with the east and the genre of *mizrach*. Also, the design resembles the *aron hakodesh* (the Torah ark), especially with the curtain framing the central opening (see fig. 4), which justly invokes the *parochet* (the curtain of the *aron hakodesh*). More obvious allusions to the Temple are the pillars of Jachin and Boaz, the utensils of the Temple, and the costume of the high priest. Covert reference to the east can be found in the Kabbalistic symbolism. Some of the *sefirot* are associated with the points of the compass. The *sefirah Tiferet* is the east, whereas *Yesod* and *Malkhut* are the west.¹⁴ Hence, the Sefirotic tree itself directs the table towards the east. Finally, in conformity with the function of the *mizrach* tables, if the lithograph was hung in a Jewish house, no doubt, it was on the eastern wall.

Accordingly, the artwork can be broadly categorised as a Kabbalistic *mizrach*, notwithstanding the fact that there is no indication of any sort in the *Explication* to the lithograph that the latter would have been intended to be a *mizrach* table. And indeed, as we will see, the intention of the author was other than composing a *mizrach* table. But before delving into the iconographic programme and the examination of the symbolism of the artwork, for the sake of better understanding, Rosenberg’s motivation and aim, and the conceptual framework of the tableau will be considered briefly.

¹¹ *Mizrah: Compass for the Heart* (New York: Hebrew Union College–Jewish Institute of Religion, 1985).

¹² For an overview on the manifold and complex importance of the Temple of Jerusalem in Judaism see Dalia Marx, “The Missing Temple: The Status of the Temple in Jewish Culture Following Its Destruction,” *European Judaism: A Journal for the New Europe* 46, no. 2 (Autumn 2013).

¹³ The “lithograph-pictorial [represents] the holy temple in Jerusalem.” Wolff, *Explication*, 5.

¹⁴ Isaiah Tishby, *The Wisdom of the Zohar: An Anthology of Texts*, vol. 1 (Oxford: The Littman Library & Oxford University Press, 1949), 284.

Primary Motive and Aim

The central notion of the lithograph is that Judaism is the manifestation of the divine law that governs nature. In his *Explication* to the tableau, Rosenberg states that his motive for embarking upon the work was to uphold the worship of the Hebrews. His reason for this is twofold. On the one hand, Judaism is the parent religion of all, hence worthwhile to investigate,¹⁵ on the other hand,

there is a sort of conspiracy in our hearts, an active and powerful rebellion, against what is called Religion. ... [T]he real object of a great many of our customs and ceremonies are not clearly explained.—The priesthood have lost the primitive idea with which it was animated two thousand years ago; the ideas of former ages not being well understood have become unintelligible, and a great many of us wish to get rid of them altogether.¹⁶

Accordingly, the motivation of Rosenberg for undertaking this work is nothing other than to educate his audience. Without religion we are left without any restraints, and we will resist all laws and morality. “Rise up then, and let us make a last appeal to the few hearts that still remain firm and faithful. It is in this point of view, that the author has composed a Table or Engraving.”¹⁷

Conceptual Framework

The main conceptual framework on which the iconographic programme of the lithograph rests is the universal harmony of the macrocosm-microcosm worldview with its intricate correspondences, in which the right concordances have been determined between the celestial bodies, the elements, the living creatures, and man. This overall scheme is basically the organic worldview which is deciphered with the help of Kabbalah.

Judaism is the imprint of the divine harmony which is synthetized into the laws of the universe. “From the beginning, there was harmony throughout creation, and...consequently there must have been laws for the physical government of the universe....Moses was but the individual appointed to recall...the institutions sacred and eternal, which had fallen into desuetude while the Jews were enslaved by [the Egyptians].”¹⁸ In Rosenberg’s work this

¹⁵ Rosenberg, *Explication*, 1–2.

¹⁶ David Rosenberg, “Origin of the Mosaic or Jewish Religion. Large Engraving in Paris, on Grand Eagle Paper,” *Freemasons’ Quarterly Advertiser* (30 June 1841): 4.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Rosenberg, *Explication*, 3.

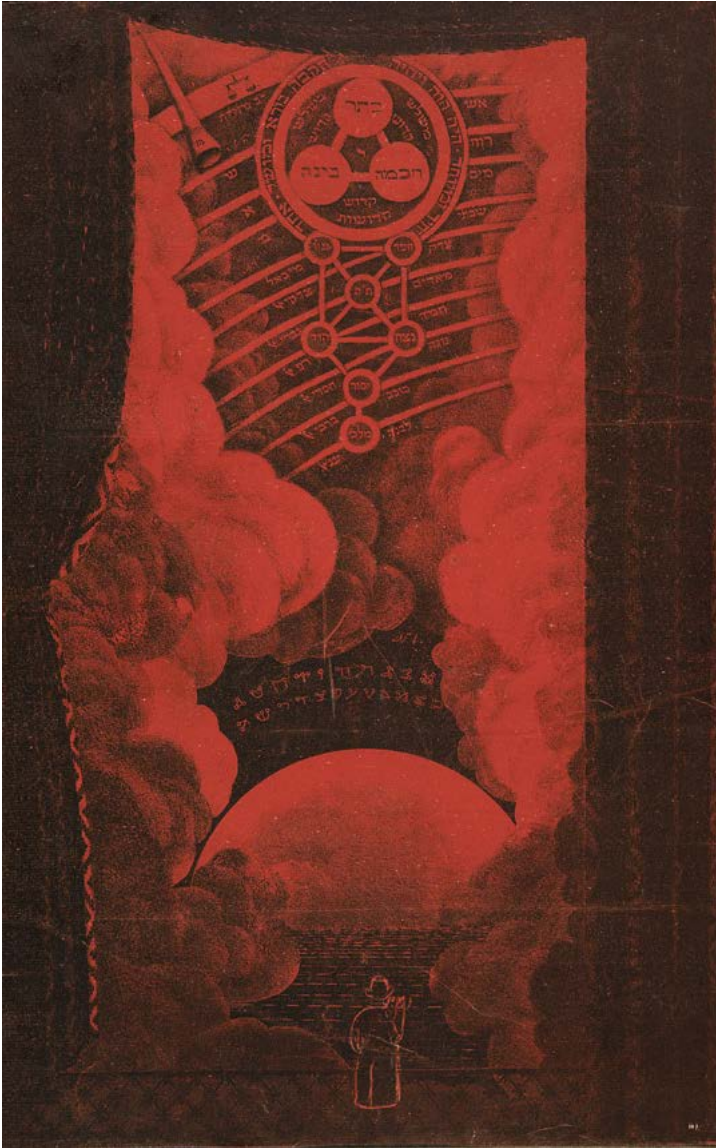


Figure 4. Creation & Kabbalistic tree (detail).

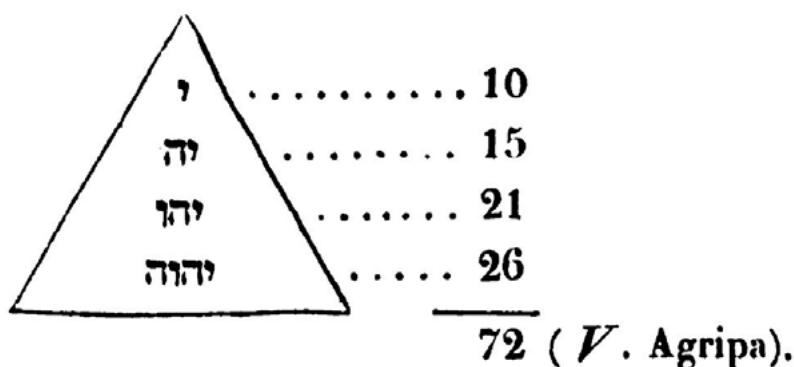


Figure 5. Agrippa's Tetractys. Rosenberg, *Explication*, 15.

view is based on a Kabbalistic reading of creation, nature, and Judaism, and his sources include the *Sefer Yetzirah*, its commentary by Joseph ben Shalom Ashkenazi,¹⁹ the *Sefer Raziel*, the *Zohar*, the *Tikkunei haZohar*, and the *Sha'arei Orab*. Beyond Jewish sources, Rosenberg also relies on Christian Kabbalah.²⁰

Iconographic Programme and Graphic Layout

The Kabbalistic content is presented visually in a carefully calculated and didactic way, and displayed through a refined and thoughtful design. The pictorial exposition of the conceptual framework is arranged along the vertical axis of the lithograph. The visual and conceptual foundation of the table is the *Ein Sof*, the Infinite God, surrounded by the *Keter*²¹ and the *Shem haMephorash*, the seventy-two hidden names of God (see fig. 3). God is the central point of all centres, the necessary first cause of the accidental existence of the active elements: fire, water, and air—symbolised by the three mother letters: *ו.מ.א*—which are the promoters of all the phenomena in the world.²² The enclosing two pillars—Jachin and Boaz of the Temple of Solomon—are the pillars of cloud (i.e. water and fire), to which comes the third element, air, in the form of the strong east wind.²³

¹⁹ Erroneously attributed to Rabbi Abraham ben David (Ra'avad), hence commonly referred to as Ra'avad's commentary. See Gershom Scholem, *Kabbalah* (Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House, 1974), 29.

²⁰ E.g. on Agrippa, see below.

²¹ For the inextricable link between *Ein Sof* (lit. "no end") and *Keter* (lit. "crown") see Tishby, *The Wisdom of the Zohar*, 242–46.

²² Rosenberg, *Explication*, 9. The three Hebrew letters *alef*, *mem*, and *shin* are of central importance in *Sefer Yetzirah* which will be addressed shortly. See Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 25.

²³ Rosenberg's interpretation is based on *Sefer Raziel*, see his *Explication*, 69.

In the centre of the engraving we see a balcony with a view of creation. The eyes of the onlooker are immediately drawn to the scene with a Kabbalistic tree, and the terrestrial globe emerging from the clouds (see fig. 4). The bond between the celestial and the terrestrial spheres is displayed prominently in an allegorical manner. The upper world is revealed through four sets of systems: the Sefirotic tree represents the emanation of the Supreme Being (the Godhead is symbolised by the Hebrew letter *yod* in the middle of the upper three *sefirot*²⁴), the angelic world is indicated by the names of angels (Michael, Barachiel, Gavriel, Raphael, Tzadkiel, Chasdiel, and Anael), the universe is exhibited through the planets (Saturn, Jupiter, Mars, Sun, Venus, Mercury, and the Moon), while the celestial sphere is illustrated by the zodiac.

In connection to the visually pronounced chief *sefirot*, it is interesting to note how Rosenberg relies on Christian Kabbalah, notably on Agrippa, but interprets it through Jewish Kabbalah.²⁵ He refers to Agrippa's *De occulta philosophia*, in which the tetragrammaton is intertwined with the Trinity within the framework of Pythagorean mathematical numerology. Agrippa presents the ten-letter name of God in the famous Tetractys.²⁶ Rosenberg reproduces the Tetractys in his *Explication* (see fig. 5),²⁷ for the numerical values of the letters add up to seventy-two, equivalent to the number of hidden names of the above-mentioned *Shem haMephorash*. Beyond this, Rosenberg also makes use of the trinitary aspects of Agrippa's Christian Kabbalistic theory. He explains how the thrice holy threefoldness is represented by the letter *yod* (the three primitive dots connected) which is situated on the lithograph in the centre of the three upper *sefirot*—*Keter*, *Chochma*, *Binah*—surrounded by the script: "The Holy One Blessed be He, Creator and Ruler; One, Unique, and Sole; He was, He is, and He will be. Thrice Sanctified with Three Sanctifications; Holy, Holy, Holy."²⁸ (See fig. 4.) Rosenberg's emphasis on the oneness of this trinity is well illustrated by his statement in a letter he sent to the editor of the Masonic journal, *Freemasons' Quarterly Review*: "the cabalistic Jewish religion had, and have perpetually a Triad, in which a Triple holiness is contained, יחשי [*sic*]²⁹ but which fundamentally

²⁴ Ibid., 8–9, footnote (b) and Chapter III, 13–15.

²⁵ Ibid. Chapter III, 13–15.

²⁶ Wilhelm Schmidt-Biggemann, *Geschichte der christlichen Kabbala, Band 1: 15. und 16. Jahrhundert. Clavis Pansophiae* 10.1. (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: Frommann-Holzboog, 2012), 468–76.

²⁷ Rosenberg, *Explication*, 15.

²⁸ Ibid., 8.

²⁹ It is highly probable that Rosenberg originally wrote יחשי which stands for בינה – חכמה –



Figure 6. Arch of correspondences (detail).

means one Godly holiness.”³⁰ The trinity is displayed visually several times: the upper three *sefirot* are connected by a triangle (fig. 4), and the celestial *yod* has the form of a triangle, figuring thrice on the lithograph: amidst the clouds of the creation scene (fig. 4), on the arch of correspondences (fig. 6), and in the middle of the upper left rosette (fig. 6).

The connectedness of the divine and profane worlds becomes even more conspicuous as we ascend further up along the vertical axis of the lithograph. In the upper section of the table an arch is presented with a scene at the centre, which is connected to the creation motif. Light is emanating from behind the shapeless *tobwabobu*, in front of which the tetragrammaton and the word *Adonai* are displayed. In the *Sha'arei Orab*, Gikatilla deals with the divine names, and when the Ineffable Name appears together with the divine appellation *Adonai*, special significance is attributed to it. Then, posits Gikatilla, the heavens impart

כתר (*Keter*, *Chochma*, *Binah*) and the י (*yod*) as a reference to the Godhead. And just as on the lithograph, he used the final form of letters in abbreviations and acronyms. A plausible explanation for the corruption of the text is that most probably the typesetter did not know Hebrew (well), hence, he mistook Rosenberg's ך for ך—the final form of the letter *kaf* for that of the letter *pe*. And when it comes to the letter *bet*, this is Rosenberg's cursive: ב. It is surmised that the typesetter, struggling to decipher Rosenberg's handwriting, could not make anything of his *bet*, hence, he chose the Hebrew square letter closest to it; by turning it ninety degrees clockwise, he got the letter *shin*.

³⁰ David Rosenberg, “Tableau Cult de Hébraïque,” letter to the editor, *Freemasons' Quarterly Review* (31 March 1844): 29. Rosenberg adds that “I make my ideas reluctantly known through emblems” which is a clear reference to his Kabbalistic-Masonic art in general, and to the three upper *sefirot* in particular.

Figure 7. *Sefer Yetzirah* (detail).

their influence and bestow their blessings on the earthly realm.³¹ This flow we can find in the *Zohar* as well. The divine names are applied to the *sefirot*: the tetragrammaton and *Adonai* are the *Binah* and *Malkebut*, respectively.³²

The divine emanation is embraced by the arch where the correspondences between the heavenly order in nature and Judaism are summarised (see fig. 6).³³ Surmounting the names of God we see four concentric semicircles spanning across the facade, dedicated to four themes:

³¹ See the Fifth Gate: “Know and comprehend that when [the names] YHVH ADNY are mentioned in this order, the effluence descends upon the *sefirot* in their entirety—from beginning to end, from above to below—until the effluence of blessing and emanation reaches the name ADNY. The entire world is then blessed with complete blessing.”

(ודע והבן כי בהזכיר יהוה אדני כסדר זה, השפע יורד עד הספירות כולן מראש ועד סוף מלמעלה למטה עד שמגיע שפע הברכה והאצילות לשם אדני, ואז כל העולם כולו מתברך ברכה שלימה.)
Joseph Ben Shlomo, *Joseph Gikatila: Shaare Orab* [in Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 1970), 181.

³² Tishby, *The Wisdom of the Zohar*, 293–95.

³³ Rosenberg, *Explication*, 19–21.



Figure 8. Jacob and his children (detail).

- I) the celestial and original letters of the Hebrew alphabet;
- II) the celestial phenomena, elements, planets, and the zodiac;
- III) the heat and cold and their accidents, the days, and the months; and
- IV) the parts of the human body.

Their harmony with the celestial sphere is demonstrated by the division of the semicircles into three cross-sections correlating to the numbers three, seven, and twelve (starting from the outer semicircle):

3: I) the three mother letters *ש.מ.א*; II) fire, water, and air; their Hebrew names and Kabbalistic characters; III) heat, cold, and the product of their accidents; IV) the head (product of the igneous principle), the womb (product of the aqueous principle), and the trunk (product of both of these potencies).

7: I) the seven double letters; II) the seven planets; III) the seven days of the week; IV) the seven apertures on the head.

12: I) the twelve simple letters; II) the signs of the zodiac with their Kabbalistic characters and their names; III) the twelve months; IV) the twelve parts attached to the human body.

Below the semicircles we see an additional section pertaining to the objects of the divine worship in the Temple of Jerusalem, arranged again according to the numbers three, seven, and twelve: the three elements; the seven-branched menorah; the twelve loaves of show-bread, the breastplate of judgement with its twelve precious stones, and the brazen laver with its twelve heads.

These numbers bring to light the core correlations that hold the divine and the mundane worlds together, as revealed in *Sefer Yetzirah*, the Book of Creation (or Formation), the earliest esoteric book in Judaism, which is

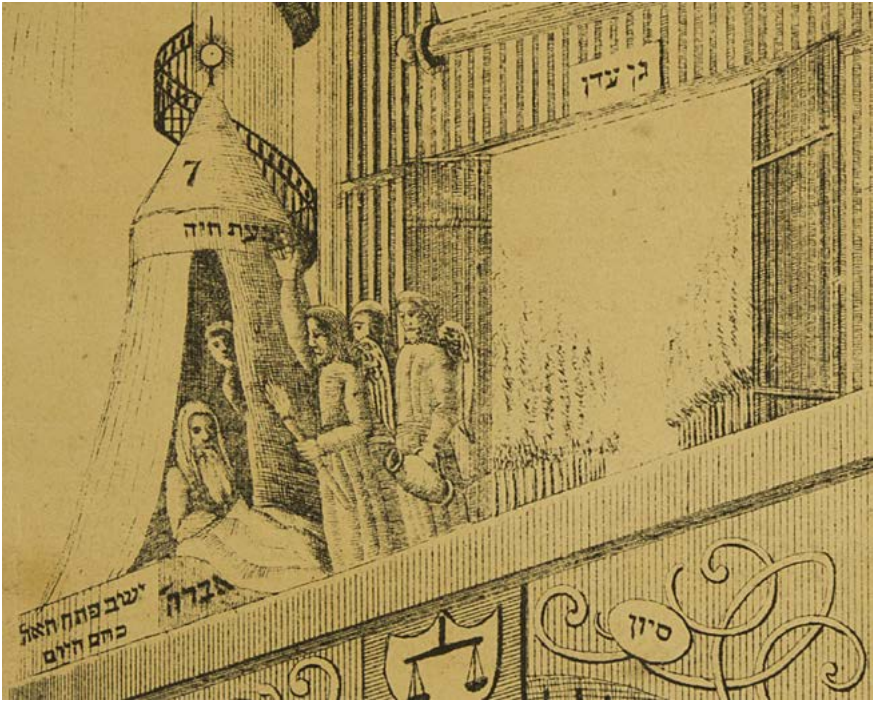


Figure 9. Abraham in his tent (detail).

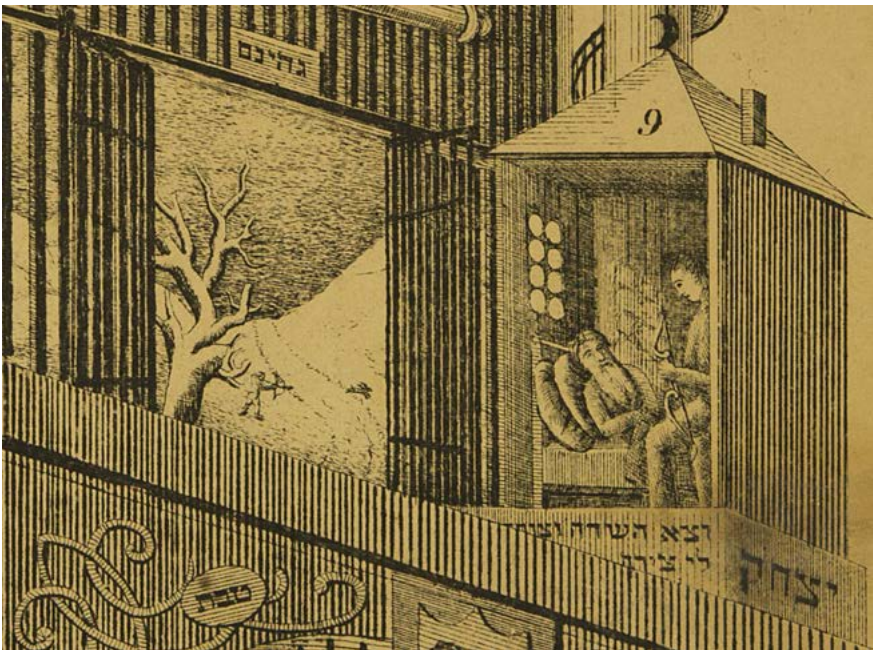


Figure 10. Isaac in his tent (detail).

ascribed to Abraham by oral tradition.³⁴ The cosmological and cosmogonic book tells the story of how God created the world using the ten *sefirot* and the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet (altogether the thirty-two wondrous paths of wisdom). The classification of the lower three semicircles follow the categories of *Sefer Yetzirah*, as indicated at the beginning of the sections of the vaults: in world, in time, and in man's body (בְּעוֹלָם, בְּשׁוּנָה, בְּנַפֶּשׁ)—literally “in the world, in the year, in the soul”).³⁵ And this is exactly the reason why Rosenberg places the *Sefer Yetzirah* (see fig. 7) as a visual connecting element between the universal heavenly order and our created world: it is inscribed into the twelve frames on the lintel linking the central opening and the vault. (The thirty-two wondrous paths of wisdom are represented by the thirty-two medallions flanking the central scene on both sides, containing commentaries on *Sefer Yetzirah*.) (See fig. 1.) The number symbolism of *Sefer Yetzirah* represents the conceptual thread running through the iconographic programme of the entire lithograph.

As can be seen, the iconographic programme is implemented by way of a carefully designed graphic layout that provides for a gradual unfolding of the conceptual framework along the vertical axis, from *Ein Sof* up to the arch of correspondences. The narrative scenes are arranged according to, and provide further confirmation for, the overall organizing principle. As a crowning element, along the roofline, we see a row of statuary (see fig. 8): Jacob symbolizes the two halves of the year (sitting in two tents), while his thirteen children the twelve months (Simeon and Levi, receiving their blessing from Jacob at once, represent the Gemini), paired up with the signs of the zodiac. The seasons are symbolised by the matriarchs in the niches (see fig. 1).³⁶ Abraham and Isaac are symbolic of the vernal and autumnal equinoxes, and identified with the *sefirot Chesed* and *Gvura*, respectively, based on the *Zohar*. Abraham sits in the tent of summer, while the three angels standing adjacent to it represent the three elements (see fig. 9). Next to the tent is the gate of the Garden of Eden, above which a good genie holds a scroll with words associated with the scenes: sun, day, light, heat, summer, seed, dew, good, sweetness, and life (see fig. 1). On the opposite side, Isaac rests in his bed in the tent of winter, with Jacob standing next to him. The beholder is offered a glimpse into Gehenna with Esau's hunting scene which is set in a barren

³⁴ For English translation and text variations see Peter Hayman, *Sefer Yesira: Edition, Translation and Text-Critical Commentary* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2004).

³⁵ Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 25.

³⁶ Rosenberg, *Explication*, 22, 25–26.



Figure 11. Celestial globe (detail).



Figure 12. Terrestrial globe (detail).



Figure 13. Passover Seder night (detail).

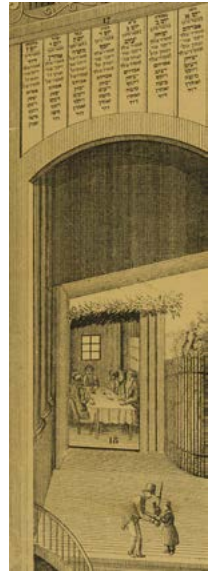


Figure 14. Sukkot (detail).

wintery landscape (see fig. 10). On this side, we see a scroll held by a bad genie, with the words: moon, darkness, night, cold, winter, barrenness, snow, evil, bitterness, and death (see fig. 1).³⁷ The celestial and terrestrial globes in the upper left and right corners (see figs. 11 and 12) are representative of the celestial influence on earth and that of man on woman.³⁸ Just above the arch of correspondences, next to the matriarchs, the two rosettes (see fig. 6) are yet again designed with references to the numbers three, seven, and ten in mind. On the right-hand side, the ten commandments are enclosed by the ten *sefirot*, and the law is symbolised by the scale of justice and a sword together with the inscription “in measure and weight.” A scroll is depicted with a line from the Jewish hymn *Yigdal*, “God gave His people a Torah of truth,” (the eighth article of faith). The rosette on the left embraces the blessing hands of the high-priest, pronouncing the benediction over the people of Israel, splitting the fingers into two sets of two, while forming a triangular space between the touching index fingers and the thumbs. Situated within this enclosed space is the letter *yod* inside the celestial *yod*. The blessing hands are encircled by the ten angelic classes. The cornucopias represent plenty.³⁹

³⁷ Ibid., 22–25.

³⁸ Ibid., 24, 25.

³⁹ Ibid., 26–29.



Figure 15. Marriage (detail).

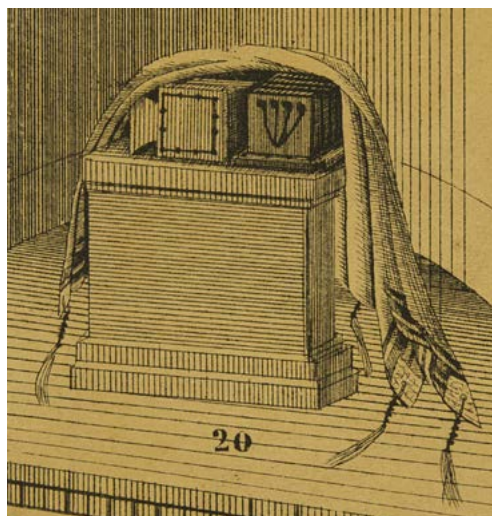


Figure 16. Tefillin, tallit, and tzitzit (detail).

The rest of the narrative scenes, as the title of the work suggests, are connected to the worship of the Hebrews. In the bottom, to the right of the *Shem haMephorash*, the day of rest, the Sabbath is symbolised (see fig. 1).⁴⁰ On the opposite side, we find the Shabbat Shabbaton, the Shabbat of Shabbats or Yom Kippur (see fig. 1).⁴¹ Next to the creation scene, on the right, the Passover Seder evening is depicted (see fig. 13), above which inscribed are the seven items to be placed on the Seder table.⁴² On the other side of the central scene, the holiday of Sukkot is represented by the tabernacle with the seven exalted guests (see fig. 14)—their names are inscribed on the façade above the vault—while in the foreground a man is depicted handing over the Lulav to a child.⁴³ The scene in the bottom right corner symbolises the marriage ceremony (see fig. 15): the canopy is the emblem of heaven, and the bridegroom and the bride are represented by the celestial and terrestrial globes, the altar, and the fire of love together with two hearts transfixed by an arrow. The seven pillars that ornament the semicircle around the altar represent the seven nuptial benedictions, the seven days of the marriage feast, and the seven lower *sefirot*.⁴⁴ The scene at the opposite side presents religious articles—*tefillin*, *tallit*, and *tzitzit* (see fig. 16)—in the description of which number symbolism figures

⁴⁰ Ibid., 33.

⁴¹ Ibid., 34.

⁴² Ibid., 37–38.

⁴³ Ibid., 42–44.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 45–49.

prominently.⁴⁵ Following this short overview, it can be concluded that the didactic content of Rosenberg's work is expressed by way of a sophisticated graphic layout that justly impresses the onlooker.

Rosenberg's London Connections

Before turning to the Masonic reading of the lithograph, a couple of words need to be said about Rosenberg's Masonic ties to London. The reason for this is that although the lithograph, together with its explication written in French, was published in Paris by Rosenberg, its Masonic interpretation, also by Rosenberg, appeared in an English Masonic periodical. Not only had he made his first known Masonic lithograph in London while living there in 1813,⁴⁶ but throughout his Parisian years he had close contacts with British Freemasons. The most notable of all was Prince Augustus Frederick, Duke of Sussex, who was the Grand Master of the United Grand Lodge of England.⁴⁷ The Duke was a great admirer of the Hebrew language (his extensive library included twelve thousand volumes on theology, amongst them fifty-one Hebrew manuscripts), and he read the Tanakh in Hebrew.⁴⁸ In 1839 he appointed Louis Loewe, a Jewish linguist of Prussian origin, as his lecturer on the oriental tongues.⁴⁹

Rosenberg embraced the Masonic ideas of tolerance, equality, and brotherly love to the fullest. This is well illustrated by his exalted lines about the epoch, the spirit of which is materialized in the splendid institution of Freemasonry:

The doctrine of reason, truth, and liberty is spreading; education, order, virtue follow suit; charity erects its altars, justice recovers its balance, and philosophy, regaining its faith in the midst of ruins, declares as principle: submission to the laws! Respect for the wise kings and for the enlightened religions! Political and religious tolerance for all pure consciences! But to that end education for the people!!!⁵⁰

⁴⁵ See *ibid.*, 51–57.

⁴⁶ *Myticum Sapientiae Speculum* ("The Mysterious Mirror of Wisdom"), lithograph, London, 1813.

⁴⁷ P. R. James, "The Grand-Mastership of H.R.H. The Duke of Sussex, 1813–1843," *Arts Quatuor Coronatorum. Transactions of Quatuor Coronati Lodge No. 2076*, 75 (1962): 37–45.

⁴⁸ Mollie Gillen, *Royal Duke: Augustus Frederick, Duke of Sussex (1773–1843)* (London: Sidgwick and Jackson, 1978), 178.

⁴⁹ Henry Samuel Morais, *Eminent Israelites of the Nineteenth Century* (Philadelphia: Edward Stern, 1880), 209.

⁵⁰ David Rosenberg, *Explication du tableau maçonnique intitulé le Miroir de la Sagesse* ("Explication of the Masonic table entitled the Mirror of Wisdom") (Paris: Imprimerie de Migneret, 1834), 5–6. ("La doctrine de la raison, de la vérité et de la liberté se propage ; l'instruction, l'ordre, la vertu marchent à leur suit ; la charité relève ses autels, la justice reprend sa balance, et la

Rosenberg worked tirelessly on the reunification of the fraternity, which had developed into separate branches throughout the years. He acted as a pacificator between the two French Grand Lodges, the Rite Ecossais and the Grand Orient, and a reunion took place on December 24, 1841.

That indefatigable and intelligent mason Brother D. Rosenberg has thus far been successful in the great object of his laudable ambition, and has merited the approbation and gratitude of the Brethren of both Societies; and as some reward for unceasing labour, we should be delighted to record some general acknowledgement from each section of French Masons, of his instrumentality in thus effecting an object that promises to be happily blended into a united fraternity.⁵¹

Working towards universality, Rosenberg was delegated to the Duke of Sussex as a representative of the Grand Lodge of France “with the purpose of bringing about some alliance between the Grand Lodges of France and England.”⁵² During the interview, the Duke expressed unqualified approval of Rosenberg’s lithograph.⁵³

Beyond the personal contacts, Rosenberg’s presence in British Masonic periodicals is also quite considerable—close to fifty appearances from 1835, including reviews of literature, popularisers, correspondences, news items, notes and queries, and Masonic musings. His works were advertised and sold in England, some of which were even translated into English.

The Transformation of the Lithograph

When it comes to the Masonic reading of the tableau, it is interesting to see how Rosenberg’s Jewish reading of it gradually turns into a Masonic interpretation. In June 1841, a promotional article by Rosenberg appeared

philosophie retrouvant son culte, debout au milieu des ruines, proclame pour principe : Soumission aux lois ! respect aux rois sages et aux religions éclairées ! tolérance politique et religieuse pour toutes les consciences pures ! mais pour cela instruction au peuple !!!”

⁵¹ “Paris,” Foreign, *Freemasons’ Quarterly Review* (31 March 1842): 97. In the same number, 8: “In Paris, the distinction of ‘Le Rite Ecossais,’ and ‘Grand Orient,’ no longer exist—a union of the two Grand Lodges have been effected chiefly by the perseverance of Brother D. Rosenberg,—and the happiest results may be expected.”

⁵² Fidus, “The Library and Museum. Science Aided by Poverty,” *Freemasons’ Quarterly Review* (30 September 1844): 283. The Boston *Freemasons’ Monthly Magazine* also reported on the event, referring to Rosenberg as “an intelligent and influential French Brother, and author of several popular works on Masonry.” *Masonic Intelligence, France* (1 May 1842): 219–20.

⁵³ “An Emblematical Tablet on Freemasonry,” *Review of Literature, &c. Freemasons’ Quarterly Review* (30 September 1841): 368.

in the *Freemasons' Quarterly Advertiser* with the title, *Origin of the Mosaic or Jewish Religion*.⁵⁴ It was a translation of his article published the previous year in the French Jewish monthly magazine, *Archives israélites de France*.⁵⁵ In explaining the reasons that led to the composition of the artwork, Rosenberg writes that “our religion is paralysed” and, as mentioned above, “the priesthood have lost the primitive idea.”⁵⁶ Three months later, in September 1841, in the “Review of Literature” section of the *Freemasons' Quarterly Review*, the tableau is referred to as an *Emblematical Tablet on Freemasonry*. Here, Rosenberg is quoted saying that “the royal art [i.e. Freemasonry] is paralyzed” and that “the existing usages [are] losing their original meaning.”⁵⁷

Rosenberg's actual Masonic explication to the lithograph, to which he himself refers to as his supplementary explanations,⁵⁸ appeared the following year, in 1842, in the March issue of the same Masonic publication.⁵⁹ And it came with the title, *Explanation of an Engraving on the Origin of the Jewish Religion, as Connected with the Mysteries of Freemasonry*. Here Rosenberg spells out at length just how the tableau in general, and its Kabbalistic content and the Jewish rituals in particular, are actually the allegorical renderings of the Masonic ceremonies, words, signs and grips of the degrees, the places occupied by the office-bearers in the Lodge, and the banquets and toasts held by the Masons. After this gradual reinterpretation, the Jewish composition emerges as a Masonic table.

The Masonic Lithograph

Although Rosenberg promoted his lithograph as a Masonic table, we are still left with the question as to whether or not the symbolism of the artwork is indeed Masonic. It is beyond the scope of this article to address this

⁵⁴ Rosenberg, “Origin of the Mosaic or Jewish Religion,” *Freemasons' Quarterly Advertiser* (30 June 1841): 4.

⁵⁵ News item in the *nouvelles littéraires* (de France) section, *Archives israélites de France* (October 1840): 575–76.

⁵⁶ Rosenberg, “Origin of the Mosaic or Jewish Religion,” *Freemasons' Quarterly Advertiser* (30 June 1841): 4.

⁵⁷ “An Emblematical Tablet on Freemasonry,” Review of Literature, &c. *Freemasons' Quarterly Review* (30 September 1841): 368.

⁵⁸ Rosenberg, “Tableau Cult de Hébraïque,” letter to the editor, *Freemasons' Quarterly Review* (31 March 1844): 29.

⁵⁹ David Rosenberg, “Explanation of an Engraving on the Origin of the Jewish Religion, as Connected with the Mysteries of Freemasonry,” *Freemasons' Quarterly Review* (31 March 1842): 26–29. The article was republished in Boston in the same year: “Masonic Tableaux, an Engraving, Illustrating the Origin of the Jewish Religion, as Connected with the Mysteries of Freemasonry,” *Freemasons' Monthly Magazine* (1 September 1842): 330–33.

interesting issue; therefore, the discussion will be confined to Rosenberg's interpretation—doubtless, he would have answered the question in the affirmative. As an underpinning for the Masonic interpretation, Rosenberg cites the Bible where “in the book of Leviticus, chap. XXV. verses 25, 35, and 39, it will be clearly observed, that Moses in enjoining assistance to the poor, uses the expression, ‘We must assist our brethren,’ and not, according to his usual phraseology, ‘Children of Israel,’ from which it may be concluded that Moses was also initiated in Masonic rites.”⁶⁰

In presenting the Masonic allegories, the rabbi addresses the “initiated,” implying that the interpretation is not conceivable to the profane. By way of example, here are some of the Masonic allegories that are to be found on the artwork when it is read through Masonic glasses. The curtain of the Temple symbolises that the office-bearers are separated from the common members, just as how the Holy of Holies is separated by a curtain in the Temple of Jerusalem from other parts of the Temple (see fig. 4). The three superior officers are in the east of the Lodge, and are placed so as to form a triangle, just as the three superior *sefirot* and corresponding to the three primitive points of the celestial *yod* (see fig. 4). The seven other office-bearers are placed in accordance with the disposition of the seven lower *sefirot* (see fig. 4). The three candlesticks (the Three Lights of the Lodge) are placed in a triangular form in conformity with *Tiferet*, *Netzach*, and *Hod*. The vernal and autumnal equinoxes are connected to the fraternal celebrations, for example, the seven exalted guests are equated with the seven officers of the lodge and the seven glasses represent the seven obligatory toasts during the Masonic banquet (see fig. 14). The thirty-two medallions (again an allusion to *Sefer Yetzirah*) together with the large circle (*Shem haMephorash*) represent the thirty-three degrees of the Scottish Rite Masonry (a high-degree system of Freemasonry). (See fig. 1). And last but not least, there are Jachin and Boaz (see fig. 3), the two columns flanking the entrance of the Temple, which are so fundamental to Masonry, wherefore they occupy an important place both in the lodge furnishing and in the rituals.⁶¹ With time, in Masonic iconography the pillars became surmounted by a terrestrial and a celestial globe, representing creation.⁶² Hence,

⁶⁰ Rosenberg, “Explanation of an Engraving on the Origin of the Jewish Religion, as Connected with the Mysteries of Freemasonry,” *Freemasons' Quarterly Review* (31 March 1842): 28.

⁶¹ Harry Carr, “Pillars and Globes, Columns and Candlesticks,” *Ars Quatuor Coronatorum. Transactions of Quatuor Coronati Lodge No. 2076* 75 (1962): 205–6.

⁶² Yasha Beresiner, “Globes (and Maps) in Freemasonry,” *Ars Quatuor Coronatorum. Transactions of Quatuor Coronati Lodge No. 2076* 102 (1989).

Jachin and Boaz with the celestial and terrestrial globes are distinctively and unmistakably Masonic symbols.⁶³

In a letter to the editor of the *Freemasons' Quarterly Review*, Brother T. of Grantham made some objections to Rosenberg's theory of Freemasonry originating with the Hebrews. He holds against the rabbi that Masonic remains are found in "Turkey, Arabia, Egypt, Tartary, China, and Japan," and that ancient ecclesiastic buildings were built by Freemasons, a proof for which is the double triangle still to be observed on the windows of several cathedrals and churches in England and on the continent.⁶⁴ In furthering his case, Rosenberg begins with respectfully allowing for a shared heritage (the basis of all religions is a form of triality) but then counters the opinion of "his illustrious Brother" along two lines of argument.⁶⁵ First, Rosenberg reminds his adversary that long before the Flood, "Anusch and Enoch erected two pillars...which were inscribed in Hebrew, with Hebrew characters....Solomon erected these two known pillars in the great temple of Jerusalem."⁶⁶ Second, concerning the double triangle on ecclesiastical buildings, Rosenberg submits that symbols may appear the same only by form, and he goes on to explain that the triad with the apex upward is the sign for fire, while the reverse is for water. The two together, with a 'G' in the centre, were used to mark property for protection: "God protect the goods from fire and water."⁶⁷

Another interesting discussion, reported by the *Freemasons' Quarterly Review*, is worth citing—it took place between Rosenberg and a French bishop on the question of whether the sun *passed* or *crossed* the equator at the vernal equinox. Rosenberg argued that the sun *passed* the equator and that "the 'pacque' or Passover—the solemn festival of the Jews, as instituted in remembrance of their departure from Egypt—had also an allusion to the time of the sun passing the equator."⁶⁸ The bishop countered that "the 'sun traversed the equator in the form of a cross, for in its course it described a rose croix, illuminated by its own lustre,' observing that at the vernal equinox the rose begins to bloom—and

⁶³ This is the reason why Wolff identifies the columns with the celestial and terrestrial globes in the upper two corners (see figs. 11 and 12) with Jachin and Boaz: "Those two columns were placed by Solomon at the entrance of the Temple." Wolff, *Explication*, 108.

⁶⁴ Bro. T. of Grantham (R.T.G.), "Some Reflections on Freemasonry," letter to the editor, *Freemasons' Quarterly Review* (31 March 1842): 29–30.

⁶⁵ Rosenberg, "Tableau Cult de Hébraïque," letter to the editor, *Freemasons' Quarterly Review* (31 March 1844): 29.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 30.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ Fidus, "Rose Croix. A Masonic Musing," *Freemasons' Quarterly Review* (30 September 1844): 285.

hence the derivation of the Rose Croix; also, that the period was a typical allusion to Christ and the Easter Feast.”⁶⁹ This phenomenon, besides many others, was used by Rosenberg in his *Explication* in support of his thesis that Judaism is rooted in nature. He writes that the “theology of the Hebrews divided the year into two halves” and the passing over from winter to summer is the time of transition, the Passover which “was to be celebrated as of divine origin.”⁷⁰

In summing up Rosenberg’s explication, the proof that he puts forward for the origination of Freemasonry in Judaism is the organic worldview. In his correlative thinking the cosmic harmony translates into the numbers of Kabbalah. Thus, Kabbalah holds the key to the occult causality: the living network of correspondences. Rosenberg sees the point of connection between Judaism and Freemasonry in the laws of nature, but whereas Judaism mirrors the celestial order because it is rooted directly in the divine system, Freemasonry reflects these laws because it originates from the Hebrews. “It is an error to suppose that Masonry has come down to us from the Egyptians, while, on the contrary, its true source takes its rise from the Hebrews.”⁷¹ That is, the divine system is the blueprint for Judaism, which in turn is the source of Freemasonry.

Masonic Historical Context

Rosenberg rebranded his product (to borrow terms from the field of marketing) by giving it a new title and a new interpretation: his purely Jewish composition was turned into a Masonic one. Furthermore, he marketed his product separately to different target audiences. Thereby he divided his potential consumers into subgroups based on their interests and characteristics: Jews and Freemasons (not to mention Jewish Freemasons).

But what interest could Freemasons have in Judaism? The Temple of Solomon occupies a central place both in the mythology and the symbolism of Freemasonry.⁷² The story of the construction of the Temple and the murder and resurrection of its chief architect, Hiram Abiff, were part of the degree work since the first half of the eighteenth century. The Temple

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Rosenberg, *Explication*, 35–36.

⁷¹ Rosenberg, “Explanation of an Engraving on the Origin of the Jewish Religion, as Connected with the Mysteries of Freemasonry,” *Freemasons’ Quarterly Review* (31 March 1842): 29.

⁷² See Guy L. Beck, “Celestial Lodge Above: The Temple of Solomon in Jerusalem as a Religious Symbol in Freemasonry,” *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions* 4, no. 1 (October 2000).

itself, its stones, and the working tools of the masons all have multifaceted symbolical and allegorical meanings in Masonry, and references to them are prevalent equally in the oral and written traditions, the rituals, and the material culture such as Masonic temple architecture, lodge furnishing, and regalia. Rosenberg recognized the craving of Freemasons for a long and established pedigree, and he positioned his product accordingly: basing himself on the shared importance of the Temple of Solomon both in Judaism and Masonry, he delivered the narrative that provided support for the ancient and noble roots of Masonry, reaching back at least to the building of the Temple of Solomon, if not to creation. And this leads us to the next question, which goes beyond the practicalities of attracting a wide audience: what interest could Rosenberg have in presenting Judaism as the source of Freemasonry?

Masonic Polemics on the Jewish Question

The answer is to be found in the larger Masonic historical setting. The reinterpretation of Rosenberg's lithograph from a Jewish tableau to a Masonic table raises interesting questions and offers important new insights into the political and social aspects of Freemasonry in Europe in the 1830s and 40s.⁷³ In German lands, where Jews were largely excluded from Masonry, it was during these decades that a growing number of assimilated Jews started seeking admittance to Masonic lodges. The controversy over the Jewish participation in Masonic life was prompted by a request to the three Mother Lodges in Berlin, in 1836, to lift the restriction against Jews. The petition was submitted by twelve brethren of *Die Loge zum goldenen Schwert* in the city of Wesel in the Rhineland.⁷⁴ The request was turned down by the Mother Lodges. The debate continued to reverberate well into the 1840s and beyond German lands: it provoked sharp responses from Dutch, French, and English lodges, and eventually even American lodges became involved in the matter.

The question of the status and admissibility of Jews sparked an ideological debate on the character of Freemasonry.⁷⁵ Depending on the attitude of the author, the neutral or Christian character of Freemasonry was emphasized: either it was presented as a universal human institution, the quintessence of all religions, hence open to Jews as well, or it was depicted as a fraternity with

⁷³ Jacob Katz, *Jews and Freemasons in Europe, 1723–1939* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1970), 96–114.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 96–97.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 115–27.

inherent Christian character which justified exclusion. The debate shifted to theological grounds, and ancient Christianity was set as the foundation of Masonry. Even where universality was held up as the fundamental tenet of Freemasonry, it was taken as a principle rooted in Christian doctrine, hence the “Masonic emancipation of the Jews” was to happen through Christianity.⁷⁶ It was during the 1840s that Jewish writers began cautiously hinting at the connection between Masonry and Judaism. By way of example: “In 1844, in another address on ‘Current Masonic Problems,’ delivered before the Frankfurt lodge, Jacob Weil quoted from King Solomon’s prayer at the dedication of the Temple, and referred to him as *unser grosser Obermeister*.”⁷⁷ Rosenberg had begun this trend a decade earlier in 1834 when he wrote that the symbols of the Jewish religion were transplanted into Freemasonry, and the rites, secret words, calendar, and perhaps even the origin of which are rooted in Judaism.⁷⁸

Although further research is to be done on Rosenberg’s place within this polemic, I shall probably not go wrong in assuming that Rosenberg was one of the first in this debate to come up with a full-fledged Kabbalistic theory on just how and why Judaism was the source of Freemasonry. The question arises, though, is why did Rosenberg bother taking stand in such a rather German-specific debate when he had already been initiated into an aristocratic lodge in Paris? Besides the fact that the 1830s and 40s witnessed the above-mentioned Europe-wide debate on the Jewish question in relation to Masonry, by which Rosenberg, being a Jewish Mason, was naturally affected, he also had first-hand experience in the matter. Thus, one part of the answer, no doubt, is rooted in his German years, when he was excluded from the ranks of Masonry. This is attested by his bitter remark against German lodges: “What?! It is in the temple of tolerance that they dare to be so intolerant!?”⁷⁹ The other part of the answer leads to my last point: the instrumentalization of Kabbalah.

Instrumentalization of Kabbalah

Rosenberg’s choice to use Kabbalah, the repository of Jewish mysticism and lore, to posit the Hebrews as the originators of Freemasonry seems to have a double purpose. In a clever way it not only provided additional confirmation for this

⁷⁶ Stefan-Ludwig Hoffmann, “Brothers or Strangers? Jews and Freemasons in Nineteenth-Century Germany,” *German History* 18, no. 2 (1 April 2000): 143–61.

⁷⁷ Katz, *Jews and Freemasons in Europe*, 124.

⁷⁸ Rosenberg, *Explication du tableau maçonnique intitulé le Miroir de la Sagesse*, 17.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.* (“Quoi ! c’est dans le temple de la tolérance qu’on ôse être si intolérant !”)

theory in order to further the egalitarian and cosmopolitan cause for the benefit of Jewish brethren, but also served as a tool for a more personal aspiration.

In Rosenberg's hands Jewish Kabbalah became a means with which he secured his position as an authentic representative of the wisdom that proves the ancient Jewish origins of Freemasonry, and this bestowed him with a stronger status within the Masonic *milieu*. This article has argued that his knowledge of Kabbalah was turned into a tool that enabled Rosenberg to gain recognition and in a way be treated as equal member of the Masonic lodge. Or perhaps more than that: Kabbalah could even be a source of pride, for, in a sense, being a rabbi versed in the mystical lore of Kabbalah, he was the representative of the "mythic aristocracy" of Freemasonry. That is, Jewish Kabbalah could not only provide legitimacy for Jews to become full-right members of Masonic lodges, but also could offer respectability and pride on a personal level. Therefore, Rosenberg had a vested interest in applying Jewish Kabbalah to Freemasonry.

Conclusions

The transformation of Rosenberg's work happened against the background of a debate that encompassed much of Europe's Masonic community. The rabbi, for obvious reasons, sided with the liberal camp of Freemasons. Rosenberg's contribution to the polemics on the status of Jews within Freemasonry was an elegant and skilfully executed composition, in which Judaism and Freemasonry are intertwined in an ingenious way. The arguments he put forward in proving the undeniable connection of Freemasonry to Judaism, and hence the right of Jews to gain full membership to Masonic lodges on equal terms, were unique and innovative. Instead of basing himself on rational reasoning within an egalitarian legal framework, he relied on esoteric Kabbalistic lore to further the Jewish cause and to confer aristocratic dignity on himself in a lodge of aristocrats.

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The Mandela Effect and New Memory

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Abstract

This paper looks at a recent phenomenon on the Internet referred to as the Mandela Effect, which states that small details from the past have been changed, altered, and edited to create a parallel universe. The reasons for the Mandela Effect becoming such a popular conspiracy theory and Internet meme shed light on our contemporary technoscience culture and the influence of advanced information technology on human cognition, memory, and belief. This phenomenon involves aspects familiar to esotericism, since both conspiracy theories and esoteric knowledge cohabit the same marginalized cultural space, sometimes referred to as the “cultic milieu.” In fact, the Mandela Effect signals a possible transformation of this space. The recent ideas from tech author and founding editor of *Wired* magazine, Kevin Kelly, as well as memory research by experimental psychologist Endel Tulving, illustrate potential factors behind conspiratorial creations and the reshaping of underground culture. This article seeks to bring the Mandela Effect to the attention of scholars by highlighting the web of relationships embedded in the phenomenon, as well as the implications for historical consciousness and the construction of conspiratorial worldviews.

Keywords

Esotericism; conspiracism; cultic milieu theory; memory; technoscience; fundamentalism

“We know accurately only when we know little, with knowledge doubt increases.”
—Johann Wolfgang von Goethe.¹

“Media determine our situation.” —Friedrich Kittler.²

Introduction

The “We are ‘Happy’ at CERN” video directed by CERN technical student Michal Laskowski and released in 2014 shows Jonathan Richard Ellis, a British theoretical physicist who is working with CERN, wearing two cardboard signs around his neck suspended on strings — one of which says “Bond #1,” the other “Mandela” — while holding up a paper sign that reads “We Are Happy @ CERN.”³ The first actor to play the James Bond character was Barry Nelson in *Casino Royale* (1954). Add that to the other cardboard sign that reads “Mandela,” and one can extrapolate “Nelson Mandela.”

Toward the end of the video a silhouetted figure dances before an oversized digital display screen of the Large Hadron Collider (LHC). At the bottom corner are the numbers 4664. If one adds another 6 to this number, making it 46664, it becomes the name of a series of AIDS benefit concerts organized in honor of Nelson Mandela between 2003 and 2008. 466 was the prison number assigned to Mandela in 1964, hence 46664. However, if one searches the internet for this number in conjunction with Mandela’s name, one comes across several unusual hints that the number may have been changed from what it was originally, that is 4664 — the same number that shows up in the “We are ‘Happy’ at CERN” video.⁴ The Internet search turns up *both* number sets in relation to International Mandela Day, Mandela’s prison number, and the concert series.

Was the number changed?

If you haven’t guessed it, this paper is about conspiracy and theory. The Mandela Effect (hereafter ME) refers to a new and unusually technophilic conspiracy theory that concerns the collective memory of the populace and the data storage of history. While to the average person memory is a linear progression of sequential events

¹ Johann W. Goethe, *The Maxims and Reflections of Goethe*, trans. T. B. Saunders (New York: Macmillan, 1906), 97.

² Friedrich A. Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, trans. Geoffrey Winthrop-Young and Michael Wutz (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), xxxix.

³ US LHC, “We are ‘Happy’ at CERN,” video, 3:34, November 3, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H0Lt9yUfVY>.

⁴ See, for example, “Mandela’s prison number seems to have morphed from 4664 to 46664,” accessed October 14, 2018, <http://whale.to/b/mandela.html>.

constituting the present reality, modern-day historians as well as psychologists and brain researchers have argued that history and memories about history are constructions shaping collective reality. Memories can be penetrated, invaded, altered, and ordered in such a way as to match prescribed paradigms. Current research reveals that memories and histories – in consequence, belief – are not static, fixed, or linear, but rather processes which are constructive, malleable, and changeable: in a word, *plastic*.⁵ What problems does this pose, not only for how scholars think about the world, but for how people understand their reality? Moreover, what insights does it provide into the persistence of esoteric knowledge in the cultural margins of society?

To analyze these questions, this paper seeks to understand conspiracy theory as a method of knowledge production connected to science, religion, and esotericism, and performed in Colin Campbell's "cultic milieu" (1972). The narrative elements drawn on in constructing the ME are those Wouter Hanegraaff has tracked in *Esotericism and the Academy: Rejected Knowledge in Western Culture* (2012) as relating to the ancient wisdom tradition that were consigned to the dustbin of history.⁶ At the very least, they proliferate in the same cultural space (to be more precise, *technocultural* space). As Hanegraaff has shown, these narrative elements consist of amalgamations of Platonic (and Neo-Platonic), Hermetic, and Gnostic forms of Christianity. Hanegraaff refers to this concept of the ancient wisdom tradition as Platonic Orientalism. Elements of this tradition have been deliberately marginalized over the course of European intellectual history. Early Church Fathers attacked them as heretical and heterodox, while during the Protestant Reformation Luther accused the Church of retaining "pagan" rites and rituals in their dogma. Platonic Orientalism was criticized as superstitious and nonconforming to reason by Protestant Enlightenment scholars such as Jacob Thomasius (1622–1684) and Jacob Brucker (1696–1770), and again by the French *philosophes*. The emergence of modern science in the early modern and modern periods saw the ancient wisdom narrative retreating into occult and esoteric societies and groups, such as the Theosophical Society, and finally coming to rest during the twentieth century in the cultic milieu. Hanegraaff's historical survey demonstrates that over time esoteric knowledge was repeatedly constructed as the heterodox or deviant "other" opposing the mainstream and normative orthodoxy.

⁵ See, for example, Joseph E. LeDoux, *Synaptic Self: How Our Brains Become Who We Are* (New York: Viking, 2002); Catherine Malabou, *What Should We Do with Our Brain?* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008); David William Bates and Nima Bassiri, *Plasticity and Pathology: On the Formation of the Neural Subject* (Berkeley: Townsend Center for the Humanities, University of California, 2016).

⁶ Wouter J. Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy: Rejected Knowledge in Western Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

Like the ancient wisdom tradition of esotericism, knowledge claims associated with conspiracism are performed inside a “deviant” cultural space and involve constructing a counter-world that opposes an official world. Timothy Melley brings into focus the implications of this social process in *The Covert Sphere* (2012), describing the phenomenon as the “simultaneous presence of competing ontologies, a plurality of worlds that makes it difficult to know which ‘reality’ is the *real* reality.”⁷ This suggests a connection between conspiracy theories and esoteric knowledge. While scholars have long recognized that religious beliefs and conspiracism have a connection, only recently have they begun to study the role of esotericism. In 2011 Charlotte Ward and David Voas developed the term “conspirativity” to encapsulate a merger of male-oriented conspiracism and female-oriented alternative spirituality or “New Age” spirituality (itself a gloss for esotericism). Ward and Voas define conspirativity as a “hybrid system of belief” with a political orientation constituting a worldview that is both surprising and recent, utilizing the cultic milieu to account for the cultural space in which such a merger could take place.⁸ However, in “Conspirativity Reconsidered: How Surprising and How New is the Confluence of Spirituality and Conspiracy Theory?” Egil Asprem and Asbjørn Dyrendal convincingly argue that alternative spiritualities and conspiracy theories are entwined in the history of esotericism. In fact, they suggest that “conspiracism and esotericism are joined at the hip.”⁹ Asprem and Dyrendal show that by considering the history of European esotericism, such a combination appears both predictable and established. Furthermore, they show that “rejected knowledge” and the cultic milieu have “allowed spokespersons who did *not* self-identify with the world of occult rejected knowledge to take over the inverted wisdom narratives of the Reformation and the Enlightenment and thus ... to view the occultists as internal enemies, working to corrupt the true faith, upset public morals, and spread false knowledge.”¹⁰ They conclude that this dynamic of

⁷ Timothy Melley, *The Covert Sphere: Secrecy, Fiction, and the National Security State* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2012), 36–7. Here Melley is referring to postmodern society, not early modern Europe, but this astute characterization of simultaneously competing ontologies is applicable in both historical contexts.

⁸ Charlotte Ward and David Voas, “The Emergence of Conspirativity,” *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 26, no. 1 (2011): 103–21.

⁹ Egil Asprem and Asbjørn Dyrendal, “Conspirativity Reconsidered: How Surprising and How New is the Confluence of Spirituality and Conspiracy Theory?” *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 30, no. 3 (2015): 373.

¹⁰ Egil Asprem and Asbjørn Dyrendal, “Conspirativity Reconsidered,” 374.

self-understanding occultists and public stigmatization of occult knowledge have facilitated the production of myriad conspiracy motifs.

This can be explored through a recent conspiracy-flavored meme on the Internet referred to as the Mandela Effect, which states that minute details from the past have been manipulated to create a parallel universe. The ME offers scholars an opportunity for analyzing the persistence of an esoteric, epistemological “Other,” and thus this paper harnesses the ME to display the ways in which esoteric and conspiratorial ontologies are mutually constructed and diffused in opposition to an “official” worldview. Some self-identifying “Mandela Effect researchers” are fundamentalist Christians, rather than New Agers or esotericists, so it may seem erroneous to compare them with historically marginalized esoteric thinkers.¹¹ However, my rationale is that ME “researchers” are unknowingly drawing on the same reservoir of esoteric knowledge within the same historically marginalized cultural space as esoteric thinkers and “New Agers” have done and still do. To support this move, I lean on Asprem and Dyrendal’s theorization of Campbell’s cultic milieu alongside James’s Webb’s “rejected knowledge” as being the cultural space of “all deviant belief systems,” and extending it to Michael Barkun’s notion of “stigmatized knowledge claims.”¹² The assertions of Christian Mandela Effect researchers would not be, and are not, acceptable to mainstream scientific and academic elites, nor to mainline Christians. Such knowledge practices are necessarily relegated to the border regions in society, where we might expect to find knowledge claims of the New Age movement, conspiracy theorists, and esotericists. A cursory excursion into something like YouTube should make this abundantly clear.

Therefore, if we follow Barkun’s suggestion that “the very logic of the cultic milieu suggests that under certain circumstances a person’s religion becomes indistinguishable from political ideology and the occult,”¹³ we shall find that those believing in the Mandela Effect, while sometimes self-identifying as Christians – but often as “red-pilled” Christians, a reference to the

¹¹ “Mandela Effect Researchers” is a self-designation among those who believe in the Mandela Effect. I employ the term as well to adhere more closely to the emic terminology, and also because research (i.e., endlessly looking up things on the Web) is literally the main activity of this group.

¹² James Webb, *The Flight from Reason* (London: Macdonald, 1971); Michael Barkun, *A Culture of Conspiracy: Apocalyptic Visions in Contemporary America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).

¹³ Barkun, *A Culture of Conspiracy: Apocalyptic Visions in Contemporary America*, 26.

Matrix films — possess characteristics historically attributed to esotericism by constructing a worldview based on stigmatized knowledge claims oriented in opposition to the “authorized” knowledge claims of the establishment. Barkun has identified two ideal types of occult-conspiracist interactions, with Type I representing non-occult practitioners who seek to expose the evil power of the occult (an example of this type is John Todd), and Type II representing those holding conspiracy theories who themselves have some occult beliefs (here Barkun gives the example of David Icke). Barkun has recently described the “merging of fringe and mainstream” and has argued that “the formerly clear boundary between mainstream and fringe no longer exists.” This change is due to advancements in communications technology, which allows for fringe beliefs to flow into the mainstream through unexpected channels. He concludes that as the occult and conspiracy theories become more mainstream, “the process of fringe-to-mainstream migration may be the catalyst for another process, namely, the creation of new elements of stigmatized knowledge ... in ways that cannot yet be seen, the fringe will eventually both contract and expand as a function of the dynamics of boundary change.”¹⁴

With the emergence of the Internet, websites like Wikipedia, and social media sharing platforms like YouTube, the cultic milieu now encompasses more than Campbell’s “occult” and non-Christian elements (i.e., “occulture”), and appears to be merging, to some degree, with the fundamentalist Christian milieu (for example, Hillary Clinton’s reference to “dark conspiracy theories drawn from ... the far, dark reaches of the internet” in her so-called “alt-right speech”¹⁵) and the underground conspiracy theory community (such as people who self-identify as “red-pilled” Christians). The spread of the Internet and smartphone technology has wrought a transformation in society, including what Campbell has called the “cultural underground of society.” It is important to note that persistent secularization might be relegating aspects of the institutional religions into the cultic milieu, especially when it comes to CERN, the Mandela Effect, and panic over “fake news.” Campbell certainly never would have included elements of fundamentalist Christianity when theorizing his underground milieu, yet this seems to me to be a potential mistake. More extreme forms of Christianity *have* sometimes

¹⁴ Michael Barkun, “Conspiracy Theories and the Occult,” in *The Occult World*, ed. Christopher Partridge (New York: Routledge, 2016), 701-09.

¹⁵ Team Fix, Abby Ohlheiser and Caitlin Dewey, “Hillary Clinton’s Alt-Right Speech, Annotated,” *The Washington Post*, August 25, 2016, www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2016/08/25/hillary-clintons-alt-right-speech-annotated/?utm_term=.39f63195c9ef.

existed in tension with mainstream society, beginning at the outset in ancient Rome and later in modern societies that operate (at least organizationally) along rationalist and materialist principles. In the current “hyper-normal” and “post-truth” world in which we find ourselves, heavily mediated by technological information flows, the cultic milieu theory needs reconfiguring. A phenomenon such as the ME illustrates that the institutional “un-fungible” beliefs of Christianity can exist alongside esoteric knowledge and New Age wisdom, oriented around conspiracism and directed at something as highly specialized and scientific as CERN. Campbell anticipates this when he concludes his essay, arguing that “the imputed processes of secularization may be creating circumstances favorable to the growth of the milieu and the further expansion of cultic beliefs” and that “a growth in the prestige of science results in the absence of control of the beliefs of non-scientists and in an increase in quasi-scientific beliefs.”¹⁶

Campbell did not anticipate that fundamentalist Christian elements, riding on the back of conspiracy theories and ongoing secularization, would appear in his cultic milieu and cohabit with esotericism and New Age spirituality. Scholars have begun to note these changes and are working to update and expand cultic milieu theory (e.g., conspirituality). Jeffery Kaplan and Heléne Lööw’s edited volume, *The Cultic Milieu* (2002), seeks to complexify Campbell’s picture in light of the Internet and increased globalization. They note that “with the explosion of Internet communications in the present day, ideas move with unimaginable speed to an ever increasingly audience of consumers ... because the ideas move so easily within the vast cultic milieu, it is not only conceivable, but likely, that vastly incompatible groups, belief systems, and individual adherents could (and do) materialize together, as if from the very ether itself, for events on which interests converge.”¹⁷

For the present paper, this convergent event is a phenomenon called the Mandela Effect, in which red-pilled Christians, occultists, New Agers, and conspiracy theorists alike have a vested interest. ME believers knowingly and unknowingly call upon forgotten or rejected esoteric beliefs in a complex cultural space where the laws of nineteenth-century physics no longer apply, and where a struggle is undertaken to make sense of modern experiments in physics (e.g., CERN).

¹⁶ Colin Campbell, “The Cult, the Cultic Milieu and Secularization,” in *A Sociological Yearbook of Religion in Britain* 5 (1972): 119–36. Reprinted in Jeffrey Kaplan and Heléne Lööw eds., *The Cultic Milieu: Oppositional Subcultures in an Age of Globalization* (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 2002), 23–24.

¹⁷ Kaplan and Lööw, *The Cultic Milieu*, 6.

The Mandela Effect

The Mandela Effect (ME) started to appear on the Internet in 2012 or 2013. Since then, its popularity has skyrocketed. Internet users have suggested alternative nomenclature for the phenomenon, such as the M Effect, the Quantum Effect, or just the Effect, however the initial appellation persists. The following presents an anecdotal account of my personal encounter with this phenomenon on the Internet.

The ME came to my attention in 2015 when I came across a blog post from 2012 written by “Reece,” who claimed to be a “graduate student of physics.” The blog was called the *Wood between Worlds* and the post was entitled “The Berenstein Bears: We Are Living in Our Own Parallel Universe.”¹⁸ It discussed the idea that the spelling of the name of a popular children’s series — a series originating in the 1960s — had been altered from its original spelling of *The Berenstein Bears* (spelled –ein) to an alternate spelling of *The Berenstain Bears* (spelled –ain).¹⁹

“Reece” was certain, as a result of childhood memories and familiarity with the series, that the former spelling was correct, and a number of others commenting on the post agreed with him. The spelling change coincided with the death of the last member of the couple who had created the series, Jan and Stan Berenstain. In fact, it was the “misspelling” on Jan’s obituary in 2012 that drew the blogger’s attention to the name change of Berenstein to Berenstain. When the blogger looked up the name on the Internet, not only was it spelled Berenstain everywhere, but all the old book covers the blogger personally owned revealed the alternate spelling. “Reece” came across more people who remembered the –ein spelling, some of whom ran home to their parents’ houses to dig up old books from the past, only to be shocked by the supposedly “new” spelling.²⁰

¹⁸ Reece, “The Berenstein Bears: We Are Living in Our Own Parallel Universe,” *The Wood between Worlds*, August 23, 2012, <http://www.woodbetween.world/2012/08/the-berenstein-bears-we-are-living-in.html>.

¹⁹ According to a 2015 article by Mack Lamoureux for Vice.com, the confusion over the spelling first appeared on the Internet in 2009 on Dreadlock Truth forum and later again on a humorist website called the Communist Dance Party in 2011, which first pairs the misremembered spelling with the Butterfly Effect. From there, the phenomenon leaped into 2012 with the Wood between Worlds blog post by Reece. For the *Vice* article see Mack Lamoureux, “The Berenst(E) ain Bears Conspiracy Theory That Has Convinced the Internet There Are Parallel Universes,” *Vice*, accessed October 14, 2018, https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/mvx7v8/the-berenstein-bears-conspiracy-theory-that-has-convinced-the-internet-there-are-parallel-universes.

²⁰ These accounts are all narrated in the “The Berenstein Bears: We Are Living in Our Own Parallel Universe” blog page.

So many recalled the previous spelling, and so emphatically, that the blogger came to the conclusion that somehow our reality had been tampered with, that in the past the name actually *had* been spelled -ein, but that after this reality-tampering it was spelled with an -ain. In *this* reality, it had *always* been spelled that way. In short, the blogger concluded we are living in an alternate reality or “parallel universe,” and for the remainder of the post “Reece” described the mathematical potentiality – through examples like imaginal numbers and quantum theory – for this conclusion to be possible. The blog post further stated that “the stEin and the stAin universes are actually just different hexadectants of the same universe.”²¹ In other words, the proposal was not exactly for a quantum multiverse but a reality slippage from one temporal quadrant of reality into a parallel quadrant within the same reality.

What was this about? I recalled the Berenstein spelling, so the post left me feeling vexed. I wouldn’t have bet my life on the -ein spelling, but it seemed to be the way I remembered it. What was more interesting was the number of other people who remembered it this way. Certainly, there were people who recalled it with -ain, but a larger number believed it had changed, and the majority was more than willing to jump on the parallel reality theory.

Things only got weirder from there. For one, in the comments for the post there was a person claiming to be the actual son of Jan and Stan, one Mike Berenstain, who applauded the creativity of the post but then went on to give a very sober history of how his family had in fact changed the name -ein to -ain after coming to America from the Ukraine for the surname to sound less Jewish when pronounced (there is a long history of this, of course). Apply Occam’s razor, Mike wrote, and you will see that it has always been BerenstAin.²² Below this comment, a dizzying list of other people agreed or disagreed with Mike’s statement, or simply expressed their befuddlement over the whole issue. By the thread’s end, people had resorted to spelling it Berenst*in.

Not long after, I came across several YouTube videos that discussed the same confusing idea, and by this point it was simply being referred to as the “The Berenst(E)ain Bears Conspiracy Theory,” and even the “Glitch in the Matrix.” Since I remembered the spelling as -ein, I delved into some of these videos and blog posts, but there seemed to be no clear answer to the whole thing. I eventually gave up.

²¹ Reece, “The Berenstein Bears.”

²² Anonymous, August 23, 2012 (3:44 p.m.), comment on Reece, “The Berenstein Bears: We Are Living in Our Own Parallel Universe,” *The Wood between Worlds*, August 23, 2012, <http://www.woodbetween.world/2012/08/the-berenstein-bears-we-are-living-in.html>.

Later in 2015 I came across something else on YouTube that piqued my interest in this subject, which revealed not only that the The Berenst(E)ain Bears Conspiracy Theory had continued, but also that it had been developing in bizarre and interesting ways. The videos I came across discussed something called the Mandela Effect, referring to Nelson Mandela, and while much of the focus remained on *The Berenstain Bears* spelling mix-up, it was now being referred to as the Mandela Effect.

The concept and name were coined by paranormal blogger and author Fiona Broome, who developed a website of the same name that focused on “Alternate Memories/Alternate Realities.”²³ She explains that she launched her website “to describe an emerging phenomenon,” and she offers the following backstory: “Years ago, I was one of the two people who coined the phrase ‘Mandela Effect’ during a conversation in Dragon Con’s ‘green room’ ... It started when Shadow [a Dragon Con security manager] mentioned that – like me – other people remembered Nelson Mandela’s tragic death in a South African prison. Apparently, others in the green room shared that memory.”²⁴ In the post that launched her website, Broome explained: “I thought Nelson Mandela died in prison. I thought I remembered it clearly, complete with news clips of his funeral, the mourning in South Africa, some rioting in cities, and the heartfelt speech by his widow. Then, I found out he was still alive.”²⁵

As we all know (or perhaps *should* know), Nelson Mandela died in 2013 following a long and prestigious career. But a person suffering from the ME remembers several things one way that are apparently incorrect. The long list of altered examples usually begins, for most people, with the spelling of the name Berenstain of the popular children’s book series. I spent over two years tracking examples of this phenomenon, and I provide a few of these below. In reporting on the ME to both laypersons and academics, I have sometimes noted a strong emotional reaction while listening to examples. There are, incidentally, *hundreds* of examples circulating online.

The movie (and novel) by Anne Rice called *Interview with a Vampire* has been changed to *Interview with **the** Vampire*. The name of the television series *Sex in the City* is now *Sex **and** the City*. The title of the cartoon series *Looney Toons* is now spelled *Looney **Tunes***. The old TV series Johnny Quest is now spelled **Jonny** Quest.

²³ Fiona Broome, “The Mandela Effect,” accessed October 14, 2018, <http://mandelaeffect.com>.

²⁴ Broome, “Mandela Effect.”

²⁵ Fiona Broome, “Nelson Mandela Died in Prison?,” accessed October 14, 2018, <http://mandelaeffect.com/nelson-mandela-died-in-prison/>.

The famous line from the TV show *I Love Lucy*, “Lucy, you’ve got some ‘splaining to do,” was never said on the show. In *The Empire Strikes Back* (1980) the *Star Wars* film, the famous line “Luke, I am your Father” has been changed to “**No**, I am your Father.” The character C-3PO from the *Star Wars* series is now thought to have a silver leg that it never had before. In *Forest Gump* (1994), the line “Life is like a box of chocolates” has been changed to “Life **was** like a box of Chocolates.” In *Field of Dreams* (1989), the line “If you build it, they will come” has changed to “If you build it, **he** will come.” The line “Mirror, Mirror on the wall” from Disney’s *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937) is now “**Magic** Mirror on the wall.” In the first *Jaws* movie (1975), the famous line “We’re going to need a bigger boat” has been changed to “**You’re** going to need a bigger boat.” Several things have been altered in the original version of *The Wizard of Oz* (1939). The first is that the line “Toto, I don’t think we’re in Kansas anymore” is now “Toto, **I’ve a feeling** we’re not in Kansas anymore.” The second is that during a scene in the movie in which the main characters are lost in a scary wood, the Scarecrow now wields a pistol that appears entirely out of place. The memorable opening lyrics of the song from *Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood* (1968–2001), “It’s a beautiful day in the neighborhood,” has changed to “It’s a beautiful day in **this** neighborhood.” Another song lyric alteration is the final line from the Queen song *We are the Champions* (1977), in which Freddy Mercury sings “... of the world” at the end. Now he doesn’t sing that line; the song just ends.

The monkey from the children’s series *Curious George* (2006–2015) no longer has a tail. Two obscure television shows starring The Brady Bunch from the late ‘70s and early ‘80s called *The Brady Brides* and *The Brady Bunch Variety Hour Show* are thought only to exist in this new parallel universe. In the 1980 film *The Elephant Man*, the ending is no longer sad but uplifting, with a ghost appearing that people seem not to remember. The 1984 Toyota Van, the so-called “terrorist van,” from the first *Back to the Future* (1985) movie has been changed into the iconic VW Bus. The character Dolly, who is Jaws’s girlfriend in the 1979 James Bond movie *Moonraker*, no longer has braces. There have also been many changes to names of various actors and famous persons, such as *Peanuts* creator Charles Schulz (remembered as Charles Shultz), stuntman Evel Knievel (remembered as Evil Knievel), country singer Reba McEntire (remembered as Reba McIntyre), and Sally Field (remembered as Sally Fields).

In addition to TV, film, and music changes, a whole host of product logos are thought to have been altered, including Coca-Cola, Yoo-hoo, Cup Noodles, Depend, JCPenney, Oscar Mayer, Totino’s, KitKat, Reddi-wip, Froot Loops, Chick-fil-A, Oxi Clean, Vicks VapoRub, Scott, Skechers, Double

Stuf Oreos, Bragg, Febreze, Curad, Johnnie Walker, Ford, Volvo, Volkswagen, and many others. Curiously, most of the corporations behind these brands claim never to have changed and/or updated their logos.²⁶

Changes cited in the Holy Bible are too numerous to mention, but I will include a few of the most popular. These pertain to the King James Version, and they are found changed in the physical copies of old, owned KJV bibles, as well as in online versions. One is to be found in Isaiah 11:6. This passage used to begin “The lion and the lamb will lay down together” but now it says: “**The wolf will live with the lamb.**” In Matthew 9:17, the word “wineskins” here has been changed to **wine bottles**. Luke 5:24 no longer says bed or mat, but now says: “I say unto thee, Arise, and take up thy **couch**, and go into thine house.”

Proponents of the ME also believe that the Earth’s geography has been altered, with South America now being too far east, and Australia being much closer to Indonesia and Papua New Guinea. There are many other examples, as well. Human anatomy has also undergone some changes, including the size of various organs such as the liver, as well as the shape, size, and position of floating ribs at the bottom of the ribcage, and the heart is now located in the center of the chest, rather than at the left breast. As with Nelson Mandela’s misremembered death, many changed historical events are frequently cited. Some people believe the “Tank Man” who stood before a column of tanks on June 4, 1989, in Tiananmen Square was killed and run down by the tank, but the man simply halted the line of tanks and was ushered out of harm’s way. Another change is the 1963 Lincoln four-seater that drove John F. Kennedy on the day he was assassinated. Now there are six seats in the Lincoln, and six people too, in the famous video footage and photographs of the assassination. To top things off, Hitler now has blue eyes instead of brown eyes, and one of the spaces you used to be able to buy on a *Monopoly* game board was called Ventura Avenue but now it is called **Ventnor Avenue**. And Rich Uncle Pennybags, the mascot of *Monopoly*, never had a monocle.

And so on, and so on.

Religious Belief and Esotericism

In the ME community, one often hears, “In this reality...” or “In this timeline, timeline B...” when discussing a supposed change. They refer to material

²⁶ The unchanged status of the logos is typically confirmed for Mandela Effect researchers online through the actual corporate websites or frequently through the *Logopedia* website.

evidence that appears to show things as they “remember them” — such as old photos, or old newspaper articles with the correct spelling of Sally Fields, etc. — as “residue.” Although a variety of explanations are exchanged among self-identifying ME researchers, the most prominent theorizing about the source of the parallel reality is divided into two separate but interrelated camps. Both camps overlap in that they believe that the LHC at CERN — which has been openly trying to discover extra dimensions and the particles that make up dark matter — has succeeded in either punching a hole in space-time, contacting an alternate dimension, or altering the timeline through experiments which have resulted in the past becoming switched, changed, or deliberately *edited*. The concept of constructing a people’s history and its direct effect on them is nothing new to historians, but what may be new is the extent to which people in the public sphere are discussing the idea as a real possibility for explaining feelings of global anxiety, confusion, disorder, and postmodernity. In addition to the CERN connection, both camps cite the development of the D-Wave system quantum computers as partly responsible for tampering with the fabric of reality through its complex computational processing operations. According to the D-Wave website:

To speed computation, quantum computers tap directly into an unimaginably vast fabric of reality — the strange and counterintuitive world of quantum mechanics. Rather than store information using bits represented by 0s or 1s as conventional computers do, quantum computers use quantum bits, or *qubits*, to encode information as 0s, 1s, or both simultaneously. This *superposition* of states, along with the quantum effects of *entanglement* and *quantum tunneling*, enable quantum computers to consider and manipulate many combinations of bits simultaneously.²⁷

Both camps of ME researchers believe in a conspiratorial hidden hand of scientists, politicians, corporations, “globalists,” and neoliberal financiers working to create a New World Regime in which billions of unconscious, materially distracted political subjects are manipulated, oppressed, and dominated. Admittedly, the development of advanced technologies are frequently funded by government security agencies and “D-Wave’s first customer was Lockheed Martin, one of the world’s largest aerospace, information systems, and defense contractors.”²⁸ Of

²⁷ “D-Wave 2000Q Tech Collateral,” D-Wave Systems Inc., 3, accessed October 14, 2018, https://www.dwavesys.com/sites/default/files/D-Wave%202000Q%20Tech%20Collateral_0117F_0.pdf.

²⁸ “D-Wave Overview,” D-Wave Systems Inc., 4, accessed October 14, 2018, https://www.dwavesys.com/sites/default/files/D-Wave-Overview-Jan2017F_1.pdf.

course, the assumption made by ME researchers is that people as subjects are not already oppressed and dominated; instead, the projected world-to-come for these two camps of believers is a dystopia of grand proportions, a “Prison Planet” in the words of one popular conspiracy researcher Alex Jones.²⁹

Where the two ME camps differ is on the evangelical front. The first camp subscribes to a mostly secular conspiratorial worldview filled with corrupt businessmen and politicians trying to enslave humanity, with the theories of quantum mechanics and the work carried out at CERN and quantum computers allowing for the possibility of an alternate dimension. However, not all the ME believers in this camp are atheistic, and many subscribe to a type of New Age spirituality with blends of esotericism, quantum mysticism, and Asian religion and philosophy.

The second camp colors their language with biblical references, the dawning apocalypse, Satanic magical rituals, and the rise of the Antichrist, signs for which they locate in all the various aspects of the ME. For this camp, the direction of the world away from God has resulted in these subtle reality alterations, which they interpret as fulfillment of biblical prophecy, citing Daniel 7:25 which states that the Antichrist will “change times/seasons and laws.” George M. Marsden famously argued in *Fundamentalism and American Culture* (1980) that American evangelical Christians have, since the latter half of the nineteenth century, reacted strongly against the influence of Darwinism and modern liberal society, culminating in what is now commonly referred to as “fundamentalism.” Marsden describes how the fundamentalist variant of American Christianity was often characterized as anti-science, anti-intellectual, even as a laughing stock in the early twentieth century, and how this stereotype became a reality as fundamentalists retreated from modern life until the second part of the twentieth century, when they reversed and entered the political sphere. Marsden’s conclusion is that “fundamentalists experienced profound ambivalence toward the surrounding culture,” and this observation is important because the religious camp of the ME displays a similar separatist attitude toward New World Order “globalists,” who they perceive to be at the heart of contemporary societal problems.³⁰ This helps to explain how the Christian elements have come to cohabitate in the cultic milieu with both esotericism and New Age spirituality in our postmodern, technoscience culture.

Furthermore, there is an echo here of those intellectual debates of Enlightenment Europe described by Hanegraaff, in which esotericism was framed as a separate domain in the various processes of boundary work of the

²⁹ Alex Jones, *Prison Planet TV*, accessed December 17, 2018, <http://tv.infowars.com/>.

³⁰ George M. Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture* (1980; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), x.

Scientific Revolution and the Protestant Reformation (as well as the Catholic Counter-Reformation). This development resulted in undermining the authority of biblical Christianity through a privileged positionality of human reason, a claim picked up by the secularization thesis during the twentieth century. With the so-called “victory of science” and the eventual expulsion of metaphysics and theology from elite academic discourses, which was replaced by a secular scientific discourse, it might be said that metaphysics and theology relocated within the public sphere.³¹ The persistent process of societal secularization may contribute to a scenario in the future in which fundamentalist Christianity finds itself in the cultic milieu, along with esotericism.

Christians enthralled by the ME display the characteristic signs of esotericism as a separate, marginalized knowledge discourse, especially in their reliance on amateur research, supernatural causality, and subjective experience. Yet evangelical ME researchers need not “war with the facts” of science, for in this new reality the facts are simply altered constantly through devious supernatural means. Clinging to the literal truth of the Bible becomes imperative. The evangelical camp is typically right wing in its views, often condemning CERN workers, homosexuals, and leftist politicians in the same breath. When videos started being uploaded to YouTube describing how the Mandela Effect had altered the Bible, this camp often had to reject such assertions, explaining that the Bible is God’s Word and thus unalterable.³² This area continues to divide the two camps, with the secular/occult/New Age one believing the biblical alterations and the evangelical one for the most part arguing that these alterations are delusions effectuated by the Antichrist. Many concepts and practices associated with esotericism and occultism are cited in conjunction with CERN, quantum computing, and corrupt politicians as yet another element of what is taking place, with a particular focus on “Satanic” ritual magic.

The occultist/New Age current of ME contributes to our understanding of esotericism and its relationship to conspiracism by highlighting the close proximity and mutual constitution of these domains of knowledge. Whatever boundary existed between them is increasingly becoming eroded through our modern information technologies. For example, one feature of the New Age movement after 2000 was the lead up to 2012 and the promise of an age of spiritual awakening that would come with the end of the Mesoamerican

³¹ Hanegraaff, *Esotericism in the Academy*, 153-56.

³² See, for example, New Covenant Baptist, “The Lion and the Lamb (Mandela Effect Debunked),” video, 7:35, July 29, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x6ku06695qs>.

Long Count calendar.³³ As the prophetic date of December 21 came and went, leaving the world apparently unaltered, it created a hole in the New Age community, which some have rectified using the ME. In the words of one blogger who posted “December 21, 2012” under a Reddit thread devoted to the ME:

I had a thought today about this date. I remember people making a big deal about this for years. When the day came and went and there was no “end of the world” people just went on with their lives. It pretty much has not been talked about since. ... I feel like this date may be a big reason for these noticeable changes that we call the Mandela Effect. I cannot shake that feeling.³⁴

This new interpretation maintains that the ME is proof we shifted timelines in 2012, and since that time an all-out war has erupted between the forces of good and the forces of evil, with the latter often described as globalists, evil wizards, and corporate elites.³⁵ However, this is often interpreted as a positive development in the overall spiritual evolution of humankind, despite the various agents of evil at work. In the words of another blogger:

I have come to see a definite link between the Mandela Effect and the destruction of organized religion; insomuch as organized religion, including Christianity, **must** be destroyed in order to clear the way for humanity to ascend to a higher existence. This does not mean the Truth that Christianity is centered around must be destroyed; it means that Christianity itself – the religious institution – is what prohibits people from *finding* that Truth.³⁶

Additional examples by New Age authors include *Mandela Effect — CERN Reality Changes, Time Travel, Parallel Worlds & Black Magick* by Edward Alexander, a Norwegian occultist. Cynthia Sue Larson, a spiritual life coach and inspirational, bestselling author, has incorporated the ME into her system but

³³ The purest example of this idea is, perhaps, articulated in Daniel Pinchbeck, *2012: The Return of Quetzalcoatl* (New York: Jeremy Tarcher/Penguin, 2006). However, other esoteric groups such as the Anthroposophists took notice, for example Robert Powell and Kevin T. Dann, *Christ and the Maya Calendar: 2012 and the Coming of the Antichrist* (Great Barrington, MA: Lindisfarne Books, 2009). For scholarly analysis of the 2012 phenomenon see Joseph Gelfer, *2012: Decoding the Countercultural Apocalypse* (Hoboken: Taylor and Francis, 2014).

³⁴ TimothyTeboux, “December 21, 2012,” *Reddit* (blog), 2017, https://www.reddit.com/r/MandelaEffect/comments/6k5kh3/december_21_2012/.

³⁵ See, for example, Corey Goode, “Ancient Aliens from the Future! Time Travel & the Cosmic Web,” video, 1:41:25, August 4, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SsWjmlvTtM>.

³⁶ TombEscaper, “The Mandela Effect Can No Longer Be Denied: Berenstein Was The Tip of The Iceberg,” *AboveTopSecret* (blog), May 28, 2016, <http://www.abovetopsecret.com/forum/thread1115051/pg140>.

downplays the conspiratorial elements, writing that “CERN came along after the fact, from the standpoint that first nations peoples have long described oral histories about how these same sorts of things (so-called ‘Mandela Effect’) have been happening since the dawn of time.”³⁷ Spiritual teacher and author Stasha Eriksen self-published a book titled *The Mandela Effect: Everything is Changing*, explaining to her readers on the back cover, “I had the phenomenon presented to me, and I felt called to show it to all of you, for what appears to be a Divine reason.” Several Rastafarians have picked up the topic, notably Ras Ben who presents on the subject, for example at the Canaanland Moors Seventh Annual Noble Drew Ali Day in 2017. The popular hip-hop reggae artist Illuminati Congo also released a song in 2018 titled “Mandela Effect.”

The most extreme interpretation of this “positive” occultist/New Age current of the ME comes from John Lamb Lash, the neo-Gnostic author known for his writings on mythology and ancient Gnosticism.³⁸ In early 2017, Lash created a YouTube account called “Mandela Effect Decoded” and proceeded to release over sixty videos “decoding” the phenomenon from his own “gnostic” perspective. He also released a “tracking page” detailing the developments on his website metahistory.org.³⁹ The series begins with a description of Nelson Mandela as a Marxist, Communist, anti-white murderer responsible for the deaths of white people in South Africa, and whose legacy is responsible for racial tensions in that region today. Other popular Mandela Effects are given a similar interpretation by Lash, drawing on ideas typically associated with the “alt-right” – although Lash himself would resist this identification. The “pings” of the Mandela Effect, as he calls them – meaning instances of misremembrance that grab your attention – are sent by the goddess Sophia – who is Gaia, the earth mother goddess – in an effort to notify her “children” that she has returned to bring about what Lash, in his reading of Nag Hammadi texts, calls “Sophia’s correction.” Sophia’s children are described by Lash as the white race of Europe who have been targeted by Marxists, Jews, leftist intellectuals, and social justice warriors. These groups are either deceived by or are working directly for the “Archons” in an effort to bring about the genocidal eradication

³⁷ Cynthia Sue Larson, “The Mandela Effect has been with us longer than we thought,” *RealityShifters* (blog), July 3, 2016, <https://cynthiasuelarson.wordpress.com/2016/07/03/the-mandela-effect-has-been-with-us-longer-than-we-thought/>.

³⁸ His most well known title is John Lamb Lash, *Not in His Image: Gnostic Vision, Sacred Ecology, and the Future of Belief* (Hartford, VT: Chelsea Green Publishing, 2006).

³⁹ Many of the videos and the “tracking page” have since been removed but are preserved on *Internet Archive* at https://archive.org/details/MANDELA_EFFECT_DECODED.

of “white people,” who are often specified as Europeans. This would wipe out the possibility for Gnostic spirituality, as well. Sophia returned to “correct” this situation, and those who recognize the “pings” are the true knowers becoming conscious of the fact that the mother goddess has returned.

Lash saves his most intense vitriol for Christians, whom he derides as being deluded and ensorcelled by Jews, the religion he sees as responsible for Christianity. Lash is thus able to align his anti-Semitic and anti-Christian views through a logic not altogether incongruous with modern reconstructions of Gnosticism. Lash would defend his anti-Semitism as being the culmination of his Gnostic experiences and lifelong study of the Nag Hammadi texts. In his reading, these texts present a religiosity that is diametrically opposed to Judeo-Christian salvation. Mathew J. Dillon, a scholar of Gnosticism and popular culture, has recently noted Lash’s “fall into virulent alt-right anti-Semitism,” writing that:

Lash’s anti-Semitism brings into focus an unsettling but unavoidable aspect of the reception of the Nag Hammadi codices. It is undeniable that presentations of the Hebrew YHVH as Ialdabaoth can be read as anti-Semitic themselves to anti-Semitic interpretations. Lash’s counter-memory of early Christianity, while historically incoherent, amounts to a reading of Judeo-Christian history as the false worship of Ialdabaoth and his rulers. Having written in *Not in his Image* that Judeo-Christianity exterminated the pagans, it is unsurprising that he would find similar archontic dynamics at play in the contemporary world.⁴⁰

Lash’s “fall” into the alt-right began sometime before he started incorporating elements of the ME into his message. However, such ideas found greater support and a new audience once he encountered the ME. Lash’s vision is possibly centered more on anti-Semitism than something like anti-blackness. As Dillon points out, Lash’s study of Gnosticism caused him to reevaluate both the Nazis and Adolf Hitler, and he has since become an outspoken Holocaust denier. While he advocates racial purity, he simultaneously interprets Judaism as a “master race” ideology that is committed to “white genocide” of non-Jews.⁴¹ The case of Lash reveals the crucial need for more research into the racist and racial dimensions of the ME, and how such ideas are recycled and re-transmitted within the cultic milieu of esotericism and conspiracism.

⁴⁰ Mathew J. Dillon, “The Heretical Library: The Nag Hammadi Library in American Religion and Culture” (PhD diss., Rice University, 2017), 144.

⁴¹ Dillon, “The Heretical Library: The Nag Hammadi Library in American Religion and Culture,” 143–45.

Conspiracism

Academic literature on conspiracy theories is limited, but there are enough books on the market to see how scholars have approached the subject — that is, as the “relic of a populist, right wing, political tradition, which refuses to go away.”⁴² The foundation for much of this literature is Richard Hofstadter’s “The Paranoid Style in American Politics,” published in *Harper’s Magazine* in November 1964, which describes the paranoid style of conspiracy theorists as apocalyptic, hinging on all or nothing, making “the big leap from the undeniable to the unbelievable.”⁴³ This leap is not for want of facts, as conspiracy theorists avidly accumulate “facts” in order to prove their case to nonbelievers, but at some crucial junction they make a leap in the imagination. This style of explanation arouses deep emotions, immediacy, and conviction, and Hofstadter concludes that the paranoid spokesperson is in fact a militant leader: their rhetoric is one of absolutes — absolute good versus absolute evil — and, in short, they are something to be avoided. Many scholars have followed Hofstadter’s line of reasoning, such as Karl Popper, David Brion Davis, Daniel Pipes, Michael Barkun, and others.

However, recently scholars have attempted to recast conspiracy theory style in a positive, playful light. These scholars point to a turning point in 1963 with the assassination of John F. Kennedy, when conspiracy theory extended toward the purview of the Left. This later material, coming out of newer disciplinary fields such as cultural studies and science and technology

⁴² Jovan Byford, *Conspiracy Theories: A Critical Introduction* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 19. For an academic overview of conspiracy theories see Michael Barkun, *A Culture of Conspiracy: Apocalyptic Visions in Contemporary America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003); David Brion Davis, *The Fear of Conspiracy: Images of Un-American Subversion from the Revolution to the Present* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1971); idem., *The Slave Power Conspiracy and the Paranoid Style* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1969); Mark Fenster, *Conspiracy Theories: Secrecy and Power in American Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999); Aaron John Gulyas, *The Paranormal and the Paranoid: Conspiratorial Science Fiction Television* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015); Richard Hofstadter, *The Paranoid Style in American Politics and Other Essays* (1964; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996); Peter Knight, *Conspiracy Culture: From the Kennedy Assassination to The X-Files* (London: Routledge, 2000); idem., *Conspiracy Nation: The Politics of Paranoia in Postwar America* (New York: New York University Press, 2002); Timothy Melley, *Empire of Conspiracy: The Culture of Paranoia in Postwar America* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2000); idem., *The Covert Sphere: Secrecy, Fiction, and the National Security State* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2012); Daniel Pipes, *Conspiracy: How the Paranoid Style Flourishes and Where It Comes From* (New York: Free Press, 1997).

⁴³ Hofstadter, “The Paranoid Style,” 37–8.

studies, reframes conspiracy theory as an acceptable response to the postmodern world, the decline of Western society, mass surveillance, late capitalist economy, and neoliberal globalization. Scholars such as Knight, Fenster, Melley, and Gulyas describe how from the 1960s to the 1990s, leftist conspiracy theories became widespread and represented the expression in popular culture of paranormal and science fiction themes, epitomized by the TV show *The X-Files* (1993–2002), with a playful, parodic, self-reflexive critique of power. Marxist political theorist Fredric Jameson describes the production of conspiracy theories, albeit critically, as the “poor person’s cognitive mapping in the postmodern age,” a desperate but necessary attempt to make sense of the globalized, multinational, and highly complex operations of late capitalism.⁴⁴ Timothy Melley builds on this idea, calling conspiratorial explanations “a way of understanding power that appeals both to marginalized groups and the power elite,” no longer referring to some small political plot but to “a large *organization, technology or system*, a powerful and obscure entity.” Melley concludes that conspiracy “has come to signify a broad array of social controls.”⁴⁵

In *Conspiracy Theories: A Critical Introduction*, Jovan Byford criticizes this reversal by affirming that conspiracy theories are harmful to society “because they harbour suspicion about any official source of knowledge [and] stand in opposition to science, medicine, and other forms of academic inquiry.”⁴⁶ The main points of his book, which echo those of Hofstadter as well as Popper, are important and contain much validity.⁴⁷ Yet Byford’s argument is precisely the reason for approaching conspiratorial thinking differently, for to accept his view we must be satisfied with Western academic and scientific forms of knowledge production, their pedigree, and track record.

In some respects, the ME might cautiously be considered as a conspiracy theory through the lens of this latter group — as the continuation of a playful, intuitive, premonitory critique of knowledge production in its Western, capitalistic mode. We could characterize a certain strand of the history of modern esotericism in this way, as well.⁴⁸ This strand is clearly evincible in groups such

⁴⁴ Fredric Jameson, “Cognitive Mapping,” in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Lawrence Grossberg and Cary Nelson (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 353.

⁴⁵ Timothy Melley, “Agency Panic and the Culture of Conspiracy,” in *Conspiracy Nation: The Politics of Paranoia in Postwar America*, ed. Peter Knight (New York: New York University Press, 2002), 57–9.

⁴⁶ Byford, *Conspiracy Theories*, 144.

⁴⁷ For Popper see *The Open Society and Its Enemies* (London: Routledge & K. Paul, 1962).

⁴⁸ See, for example, Wouter J. Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion and Western Culture: Esotericism in the Mirror of Secular Thought* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998); Egil Asprem and Kennet Granholm, *Contemporary Esotericism* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2014).

as the Discordians in the 1960s, which invented a parody religion in underground magazines like *The East Village Other* (1969) in New York, and in Robert Anton Wilson's *The Illuminatus! Trilogy* (1975).⁴⁹ These artists and writers brought together aspects of occultism, conspiracy, and New Age spirituality from the 1960s countercultural movement and blended them with humor, science fiction, and alternative history. Wilson's contribution is especially important because of his ability to simultaneously resist and acknowledge the validity and absurdity of fringe topics. In his fiction, he established a self-conscious position of ambiguity and offered an almost hacker-mentality approach to life. He was an influence on the California alternative spirituality and anti-establishment scene in and around the Bay Area during the '80s and '90s, and this influence bled into the more mainstream New Age movement that would later explode across the West Coast. As Joseph Dumit has commented, "the crux of New Age, the power of New Age, is generated by the fluidity of the playful attitude on the part of those persons who continuously create phenomena that can be identified with New Age."⁵⁰ This is the Wilson style of conspiracy theory, which culminated in the 1990s with the *X-Files*, a TV show that as recently as 2018 aired an episode titled "The Lost Art of Forehead Sweat" that tackled the Trump administration and fake news through the lens of the ME.

The extent to which New Agers and conspiracy theorists, including ME researchers, are aware of this influence on their beliefs is not altogether certain, but it is an important influence that appears to be more pervasive than is often recognized. The recent "alt-right" obsession with the Pepe the Frog meme, around which was constructed a parody deity called Kek and a parody country called Kekistan, is a clear example that such influences persist.⁵¹ In postmodern times, a serious attack has been leveled against the validity of facts, truth, and knowledge claims of so-called experts. The ME's uncertainty and challenge to recorded history and knowledge functions as a necessary reflection of our postmodern condition, and as a sign indicating the further liquid element of contemporary society, the slippage of our collective memory.

⁴⁹ For a useful overview, see Jesse Walker, *The United States of Paranoia: A Conspiracy Theory* (New York: HarperCollins, 2014), Chapter 9.

⁵⁰ Joseph Dumit, "Playing Truths: Logics of Seeking and the Persistence of the New Age," *Focaal: European Journal of Anthropology*, no. 37 (2001): 69.

⁵¹ See Egil Asprem, "The Magical Theory of Politics: Meme Magic, the Cult of Kek, and How to Topple an Egregore," forthcoming in *Nova Religio*; Jason Wilson, "Hiding in Plain Sight: How the 'Alt-Right' Is Weaponizing Irony to Spread Fascism," *The Guardian*, May 23, 2017, www.theguardian.com/technology/2017/may/23/alt-right-online-humor-as-a-weapon-facism.

New Memory, Hive Mind

I will briefly summarize two areas of research that could shed light on conspiratorial creations such as the ME. The aim is not to make a claim, but to suggest two potential entry points for tracking the ME's relation to the cultural imaginary of a secularized, technoscientific society. The examples concern the capacity, ability, and limitations of memory, both human and digital, and reveal that memory is more complex and enigmatic than is supposed.

A paper published in 1985 by Swedish scientist and physician D. H. Ingvar entitled "Memory of the Future: An Essay on the Temporal Organization of Conscious Awareness" introduced the idea that memory could be organized around future behavior and cognition.⁵² Ingvar's research focuses on the temporal organization of conscious awareness at the neurological level. Conscious experience is, according to Ingvar, considered to be based on past memories, the awareness of a now-present, and "concepts of future behavior and cognition, i.e. concepts of events which have not taken place."⁵³ Ingvar explains:

The capacity to retain and be conscious of concepts of future events is here termed "memory of the future". This unconventional and simple term was chosen since concepts about the future, like memories of past events, can be remembered, often in great detail. They can also, like memories of the past, be recalled spontaneously, or at will. ... The important question to be raised here is to what extent do events in the brain, related to the past, the present, and the future take place at a conscious (attentive) level or at a subconscious (pre-subtentive) level, or at both simultaneously.⁵⁴

Ingvar's argument is that human beings have an "inner future," composed of anticipated future plans, events, and goals, which they can recall at will and in painstaking detail. It follows, then, that they can spontaneously change this inner future and remember it differently. Interestingly, Ingvar concludes his paper by stating that "it is only by access to serial plans for future behavior and cognition, i.e. 'memory of the future', that we can select and perceive meaningful messages in the massive sensory barrage to which our brains are constantly exposed."⁵⁵ This relationship between temporality and memory

⁵² D. H. Ingvar, "Memory of the Future: An Essay on the Temporal Organization of Conscious Awareness," *Human Neurobiology* 4, no. 3 (1985): 127-36.

⁵³ Ingvar, "Memory of the Future," 128.

⁵⁴ Ingvar, "Memory of the Future," 128.

⁵⁵ Ingvar, "Memory of the Future," 134.

helps us understand the larger neurological implications of the ME; namely, that altering details of a person's past influences the course of their future — just as, according to Ingvar, the present is influenced by the future.

In the same year, 1985, Estonian-born Canadian experimental psychologist and cognitive neuroscientist Endel Tulving developed his idea for the capacity of “autonoetic consciousness.”⁵⁶ According to Tulving, “Autonoetic (self-knowing) consciousness is the name given to the kind of consciousness that mediates an individual's awareness of his or her existence and identity in subjective time extending from the personal past through the present to the personal future. It provides the characteristic phenomenal flavor of the experience of remembering.”⁵⁷ This *flavor* “distinguishes remembering from other kinds of awareness, such as those characterizing perceiving, thinking, imagining, or dreaming.”⁵⁸

Like Ingvar, Tulving's capacity for memory is in integral property of human consciousness and conscious experience. Tulving relies on three types of memory: procedural, semantic, and episodic. For this paper we will consider only episodic memory, or the act of remembering personally experienced events. In most instances, ME researchers describe their experience of the past, having been altered and changed, in terms of strong personal recollections of *remembering* the original corporate logos or historical events from past experienced events or moments in their lives.

In a 2000 paper, “Where in the Brain Is the Awareness of One's Past,” Endel Tulving and Martin Lepage conclude that to recall a past event in one's memory is to consciously revisit the event in the present as a *new experience*.⁵⁹ This is Tulving's “autonoetic awareness,” which constitutes an individual's ability to traverse the personal past and future. Postulations on the formation of a neuropathic self and the plasticity of the brain by Catherine Malabou and others have since contributed to a dialogue about the self-creativity of mental processes.⁶⁰ Considering these developments alongside the ME opens the door to the interesting possibility for a complete autonomous self-regulation of temporality, memory, and the experience of reality.

⁵⁶ Endel Tulving, “Memory and Consciousness,” *Canadian Psychology* 26, no. 1 (1985): 1–12.

⁵⁷ Tulving, “Memory and Consciousness,” 1.

⁵⁸ Tulving, “Memory and Consciousness,” 3.

⁵⁹ Martin Lepage and Endel Tulving, “Where in the Brain Is the Awareness of One's Past?,” in *Memory, Brain, and Belief*, ed. Daniel L. Schacter and Elaine Scarry (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 208–28.

⁶⁰ See, for example, Catherine Malabou, *What Should We Do with Our Brain?* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008); Joseph E. LeDoux, *Synaptic Self: How Our Brains Become Who We Are* (New York: Viking, 2002); David William Bates and Nima Bassiri, *Plasticity and Pathology: On the Formation of the Neural Subject* (Berkeley: Townsend Center for the Humanities, University of California, 2016).

Tulving's research and his scientific work is part of a complex, ongoing discussion related to the academic domains of psychology and neurobiology, much too complex to rehearse in a single paper focusing on conspiracy theory, religious belief, and esotericism. What is important to take away from this excerpt of Tulving's work, however, is his idea of auto-noetic consciousness and its relation to episodic memory and the ME, which will hopefully illustrate the function of memory as a dynamic, creative instrument at work within the "inner worlds" of people, playing a crucial role in how they construct not only their past and their present, but also their anticipated futures.

The recent research on future memory is important for thinking about the ME because it reveals the complex and creative elements at work in the memory apparatus. As this type of cognitive and psychological research demonstrates, when a person calls up a memory from the past, it is not as though they are putting on an old VHS tape and pressing play, but rather that the person is literally having a new experience, mentally, physically, affectively, and grounded in the sensorium. This idea can be traced to Hermann Ebbinghaus (1850–1909), a German psychologist who initiated experimental research into memory. Ebbinghaus's theories were developed by Sir Frederic Bartlett who argued in *Remembering: A Study in Experimental and Social Psychology* (1932) that "memory appears to me an affair of construction rather than reproduction."⁶¹ In other words, memory is a constructive process, a fitting together of fragments of information from a variety of diverse sources, and not a literal replication of past events or duplication of a tiny picture stored somewhere in the brain.

This interpretation of memory as "constructive" entered public awareness with Daniel L. Schacter's successful *Searching for Memory*, published in 1997.⁶² Schacter was a student of Tulving at the University of Toronto in the late 1970s, and his book discusses the various theories about memory based on scientific advances and research. Using case studies and new technological capabilities, the book presents Schacter's conclusion of "constructive memory."⁶³ In a 2012 interview with the *Harvard Gazette*, he referred to memory as both the "time machine of the brain" and a type of "virtual reality simulator."⁶⁴

⁶¹ F. C. Bartlett, *Remembering: A Study in Experimental and Social Psychology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1932), 205. See also Daniel L. Schacter, "Adaptive Constructive Processes and the Future of Memory," *The American Psychologist* 67, no. 8 (2012): 603–13.

⁶² Daniel L. Schacter, *Searching for Memory: The Brain, the Mind, and the Past* (New York: Basic Books, 1996).

⁶³ See also Daniel L. Schacter, "The Seven Sins of Memory: Insights from Psychology and Cognitive Neuroscience," *American Psychologist* 54, no. 3 (1999): 182–203.

⁶⁴ Taylor Beck, "Making Sense of Memory," *Harvard Gazette*, August 16, 2012, accessed

Memory is therefore more complex and quasi-mysterious than we tend to imagine. As Tulving and others have argued, since this curious reliving in the present of a recalled memory is true for the past, it could also be true of the future. What might this tell us about the ME and the role it plays in shaping the collective consciousness of the cultic milieu? I include this research in my paper on the ME and conspiracy theory to help us think through the deeper implications of this recent phenomenon, and what those implications are signaling us to pay attention to. The research on future memory reveals the blurry boundaries of the tripartite division of temporality – past, present, and future. Ingvar and other researchers base their definition of conscious experience on a linear model of past, present, and future, yet the three temporal concepts are, in fact, entangled within the inner experience of the individual. If we are to believe what Karen Barad has argued about the nature of the universe as a type of quantum “smear,” then the so-called individual is hopelessly entangled with matter, at both the social and ontological level.⁶⁵

Yet memory is fallible. A Google search of the ME brings up the Wikipedia entry for false memories and confabulation.⁶⁶ What is confabulation and why has the ME been hyperlinked to this Wikipedia article? William Hirstein published a monograph on the subject in 2005, entitled *Brain Fiction: Self-Deception and the Riddle of Confabulation*. Hirstein defines this disturbance in terms of “stories produced to cover gaps in memory.”⁶⁷ However, confabulation can define various other features, including denial, split-brain syndrome, and even schizotypy. Hirstein points to fracturing in one’s epistemic system as a possible cause of confabulation. This could account for another feature of confabulation in which people “do not experience doubt about their claims and ideas, whereas a normal person would. The claims are epistemically ill-grounded because they have not passed a review process that can result in doubt about them.”⁶⁸ Hence the resistance and denial which emerges when confabulations are confronted with conflicting data. The important point here is not whether one sequence of events is more “real” than the other, but rather that the resisted data and the clung-to data represent competing forms of knowledge.

October 14, 2018, <https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2012/08/making-sense-of-memory/>.

⁶⁵ Karen Michelle Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007).

⁶⁶ There has been a “Rational Wiki” page made for the ME. See https://rationalwiki.org/wiki/Mandela_effect.

⁶⁷ William Hirstein, *Brain Fiction: Self-Deception and the Riddle of Confabulation* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005), 19.

⁶⁸ Hirstein, *Brain Fiction*, 21.

However, it is therefore important not to write off the ME as “mere” confabulation, but to consider the phenomenon in light of what we have said about the effect of subjective memory on an individual’s cognitive map. This phenomenon is part of a process that has, and will continue to have, profound consequences on the emergent future. The unique relationship shared by memory, temporality, and historical consciousness provides fertile ground for exploring the potential implications of the ME and its collective effect on Campbell’s “social underground.”

A final example to highlight is the role that digital memory, cloud storage, and big data play in the ME. In 2001, tech author and founding executive editor of *Wired* magazine Kevin Kelly gave a talk for the PARC Forum at the Xerox Palo Alto Research Center entitled “The Self-Replicating Omega Library.”⁶⁹ In this talk, Kelly presents his idea of a self-replicating universal virtual library, or a “forever library,” which would contain all the books, ideas, and knowledge in the world; everything electronically scanned and uploaded to the cloud and the Internet. Google is in the process of digitizing all the books in the library, he informs us, and eventually they will accomplish this endeavor creating a neo-Library of Alexandria. This forever library would contain within itself the necessary information required to reproduce itself. After all the books in physical libraries have been digitized and hyperlinked together — and after all movies, TV shows, music, images, ideas, even objects, are scanned and hyperlinked — then we arrive at something new, something much like a giant neural apparatus, what Kelly compares to a “hive mind.” Kelly develops this idea more fully in his 1994 book *Out of Control: The New Biology of Machines, Social Systems, and the Economic World*.⁷⁰

The most useful indications of Kelly’s “Omega Library” talk regarding the ME are about “discovery.” Kelly explains that discovery, in the sense he uses it, is not about uncovering something that has never been perceived before (think of “The New World” and the indigenous peoples already living there). Discovery for Kelly involves the linking of previously unknown things to the wider growing body of structured knowledge being “stored” in people’s brains. “Information” or “facts” are “discovered” when something unknown by the mass collective of knowledge suddenly links to what is already known (or, in case of the ME, thought to be known) and becomes integrated into the whole, *changing it*.

⁶⁹ Kevin Kelly, “The Self-Replicating Omega Library,” video, 43:44, February 14, 2012 (recorded on November 15, 2001), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6oQbsYZPTsw>.

⁷⁰ Kevin Kelly, *Out of Control: The New Biology of Machines, Social Systems, and the Economic World* (New York: Basic Books, 1994).

Kelly explains that with all the books in the library digitized, along with everything else, much of the information and data being produced will not (and does not) come exclusively from human beings. In addition to human contributions to information, a large amount is generated by the Internet, by machines and algorithms themselves – what we now could refer to as “soft” A.I. Kelly invites his audience in Palo Alto to consider the numerous bureaucratic forms generated each day, some of which people never set eyes on, and self-generating spam-bots and even malware. There is always a low-level textual generation taking place on the Internet controlled by a kind of neural apparatus – or Kelly’s “hive mind.” Expanded exponentially, “discovering” becomes not much different from “creating”: there will be so many unseen, machine-generated, hyperlinked knowledge webpages and files that looking something up, and then finding it, will be akin to creating it. It follows, then, that in a future, highly technologically mediated society, the process will no longer be the same as purely *remembering* something and confirming or learning it for the first time. The separation between discovery and remembrance will close. These newly created items will be linked to the rest of the Omega Library and integrated, reorganizing human epistemology and perception. In short, Kelly argues that finding something on the Internet will, in the future, be akin to bringing that something into existence.

Could the ME be an early symptom of Kelly’s projected techtopia?⁷¹

Conclusion

Outside the CERN facility there is a large statue of the Lord Shiva of the Hindu religion depicted as being engaged in the *Nataraj* dance, a performative myth or ritual which consists of the creative *Lasya* dance and the destructive *Tandava* dance, the latter representing the destruction of outmoded worldviews and ways of life. The common interpretation of this iconic ritual image is necessary destruction in order that new creation can emerge. The statue was a gift from India to commemorate its close association with CERN, beginning in the 1960s and continuing today. In the summer of 2016, the domain of esotericism intruded on the mainstream narrative in the form of an apparently leaked smartphone video showing a CERN worker spying

⁷¹ Kelly has developed his ideas further in recent years, claiming that technology is an evolving ecosystem, a living, intelligent species that is seeking to come into existence to form a seventh kingdom of life. See, for example, Kevin Kelly, *What Technology Wants* (New York: Penguin Books, 2011).

on a violent, black magic style ritual being performed before the Shiva statue late at night. The ceremony included the ritual sacrifice of a willing, young, virgin-like girl. The participants of the ritual wore hooded black robes and carried torches, and the hierophant ritually slays the virginal girl in white using a sharp blade. The leaked video circulated on the Internet, functioning as corroborative proof for some that CERN and the “elite” scientists and politicians controlling the world are indeed Satanic ritual occultists. Others reasoned that, even if the video was fake, it was being performed at night on the high-level security grounds of CERN, the implication being that CERN workers, either mockingly or genuinely, were engaged black magic. The video caused such a commotion that CERN issued a public response on their website:

I saw a video of a strange ritual at CERN, is it real?

No, this video from summer 2016 was a work of fiction showing a contrived scene. CERN does not condone this kind of action, which breaches CERN’s professional guidelines. Those involved were identified and appropriate measures taken.⁷²

Whether or not “those involved” were truly identified and reprimanded is beside the point. What is significant is that in this piece of media all the elements that characterize the cultic milieu are present. A scientific institution, carrying out its work by a secular method, is here resituated in a world of supernatural causality, interconnectedness, and web-like correspondences (“as above, so below”), evil machinations of technology and power, dark individuals conspiring to keep people deceived, and of course the hidden hand of magic behind it all. The video exposes the claims of esoteric/religious knowledge production and mainstream secular claims speaking on behalf of “Truth” by reminding us that both interpretations exist as two sides of the same coin, that what is carried out in one sphere necessarily reflects in the other. This should encourage us to seek new ways of categorization outside the old orchestrated binaries of knowledge.⁷³

In this paper I have endeavored to expose the phenomenon of the ME to scholars in the hope of stimulating further research into the subject concerning its implications for a transformation of the cultic milieu within

⁷² “CERN answers queries from social media,” accessed October 14, 2018, <https://home.cern/resources/faqs/cern-answers-queries-social-media>.

⁷³ For the fake human sacrifice filmed at CERN see “Fake human sacrifice filmed at Cern, with pranking scientists suspected,” *The Guardian*, August 17, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/science/2016/aug/18/fake-human-sacrifice-filmed-at-cern-with-pranking-scientists-suspected>.

our technoscience culture. As unauthorized ideas and beliefs move closer together through the ease of technological transmission, they will continue to move farther away from authorized knowledge and narratives. They could increasingly find themselves mixing and potentially synchronizing. The convergence of esotericism, fundamentalist Christianity, and conspiracism is encouraged by those in the tech industry itself, as for example when Geordie Rose, founder of D-Wave Quantum Computing, compares his quantum computer to “an altar to an alien god” and later suggests, in response to Christian ME researchers at a June 2017 TechVancouver conference, that artificial intelligence would be “summoning” the “Great Old Ones” of the occult-inspired author H. P. Lovecraft.⁷⁴ The Great Old Ones are fictional galactic demons that feature prominently in Lovecraft’s short stories, and yet they have become the focus of actual magical and occult ritual practices among some fans since the author’s death (e.g. Kenneth Grant). Here, then, we see a spokesperson for the tech industry publicly endorsing occulture themes as being connected to advanced technological development, using analogy and religious language to draw such themes closer together. In Lovecraft’s stories, the Great Old Ones are worshiped on Earth by murderous occultists and they have no regard for humankind whatsoever, seeking to wipe human life out of existence primarily because of how unintelligent and insignificant humans seem in comparison to themselves. Such public proclamations reinforce the belief among New Age/secular and Christian conspiracy researchers that ahistorical supernatural forces are at work in the world, which are endeavoring to alter reality. It therefore seems reasonable that they would continue to find grounds to cooperate and stand together. An example of these converging groups is the “QAnon” conspiracy. QAnon received widespread mass-media coverage across the Web after attendees at a President Trump rally in Florida displayed a Q on shirts and signboards. Justin Caffier writing for *Vice* called QAnon “the greatest crossover event in conspiracy theory history,” for Q overtly uses “references to all the greatest hits like Freemasons, MK Ultra, and the symbology of the Illuminati,” as well as Christian notions of “The Great Awakening” and the Satanic magic of the elites, as well as references to “red-pilling.” In our current situation, we are likely to see more such collaborations.⁷⁵

⁷⁴ TechVancouver.Org, “Geordie Rose of Kindred AI presents Super-intelligent Aliens Are Coming to Earth,” video, 21:28, July 12, 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cD8zGnT2n_A.

⁷⁵ Justin Caffier, “A Guide to QAnon, the New King of Right-Wing Conspiracy Theories,” *Vice*, June 12, 2018, https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/ywex8v/what-is-qanon-conspiracy-theory.

The psychological symptoms indicated by the ME could increase as information spreads and technological media complexifies. The relationship between memory, event, and narrative is apparent in the cultic milieu through its reevaluation of ancient history, the re-dating of sites such as the Sphinx in Egypt, and the belief in fabled ancient continents such as Atlantis. Within esotericism there is often already tension between a sacred timeline of past events and the mainstream narrative, similar to fundamentalist Christians who believe in Young Earth creationism. The most immediate example of this situation is “fake news,” where people choose to believe that some accounts are more *truthful* than others — meaning such accounts have been less infiltrated by conspiratorial elements of manipulation. The overload of information, coupled with the breakdown of traditional thought patterns under the influence of “modernity,” has culminated in the idea that we live in a post-truth world, where people are increasingly forced to determine, or perhaps create, their own past, present, and future. Modernity is often seen as synonymous with ambiguity and thus people will continue to struggle as they seek for truth in black and white terms. ME researchers evoke Marsden’s nineteenth- and twentieth-century fundamentalists, scouring the Bible to understand society. The conclusions they arrive at, the sources they draw on, and the space in which they present their claims intersect with rejected discourses of esotericism and conspiracism. Incoherency of data has always been a problem — it is the problem of changing worldviews — but rejected data is organizing itself in news ways with social media. New Agers, conspiracy theorists, fundamentalist Christians, and “everyday folks” are all being confronted with the instability of history and objective knowledge. The Copernican revolution and the existential breakdown of the Aristotelian-Ptolemaic worldview caused a similar situation, in which people lamented the loss of the great chain of being that linked everything together in a meaningful harmony — and who, we could say, were at one point certain that their Earth was the center of the universe, before their reality was *altered*.

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Book Reviews

Arthur Versluis. *Platonic Mysticism: Contemplative Science, Philosophy, Literature, and Art*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2017. vii + 163 pp. ISBN: 9781438466330.

Platonic Mysticism is a polemical work arguing for a particular understanding of mysticism in the West and for its broad adoption across the field of the study of religion, with special reference to the study of Western esotericism. The book makes several interesting claims, raises some important points with regard to methodology, and, speaking generally, aims to move debate on the interpretation of mysticism, and esoteric religion more generally, in fruitful new directions. Versluis' ideas are particularly persuasive in roughly the second half of the book, where he leaves behind the attempts at tradition-building of the first three chapters (see below) and enters into the question of possible relationships between metaphysics and literary interpretation, particularly the interpretation of mystical literature. Unfortunately, the book does too little to prove the rather ambitious claims made in the first three chapters, nor, even taking these claims as proven, does it really argue in a persuasive way that they are as important or as universal as the author believes. The book also suffers from some factual errors, mostly minor but occasionally quite serious. The result is an interesting and provocative book which unfortunately falls short of the standards to be expected from an historical study but which nevertheless raises many interesting suggestions, while failing to prove very much.

I take the main claims of the book to be as follows: 1) There is a central tradition within Western mysticism, the Platonic tradition, which is key to understanding Western mysticism as a whole. 2) Mysticism can be defined essentially as 'religious experiences corresponding to the direct cognition of a transcendent reality beyond the division of subject and object.' 3) The Platonic

tradition, once well recognised as central in the academic study of mysticism at the turn of the last century, has been written out of this history more recently, a situation which should be rectified. 4) Understanding Platonic metaphysics is an essential tool for understanding the mystical literature which (Versluis thinks) stems from that tradition, and has the potential to open fruitful interpretive access to such literature and, conversely, 5) taking a reductionistic materialist or similar ‘outsider’ perspective makes it impossible fully to understand this literature.

1) Versluis begins his book with the statement that “‘mysticism’ as a descriptor becomes intellectually incoherent if we don’t recognize and acknowledge its Platonic history and context.’ (1) After this beginning, and some – but not enough – consideration of the possible parameters of the term ‘mysticism,’ (2–3) Versluis describes what he takes to be the Platonic mystical tradition, beginning with Plato, transmitted through middle and late Platonism in antiquity, with Plotinus in particular taken as the prime exemplar of the cognitive mysticism which Versluis sees as the essence of Platonic tradition, (6–7) and then the Pseudo-Dionysius, (3–4) whom Versluis refers to throughout as ‘Dionysius the Areopagite,’ whence it passes into Christianity. Later in the narrative, a longer lineage is drawn down to modern times via medieval Christian mysticism, the Florentine Renaissance Platonists, Böhme and the Cambridge Platonists, American Transcendentalism, and into modern times (e.g. 17).

One could argue that all of the writers mentioned might be seen as different parts of a long lineage of disseminated and transformed Platonic ideas – there is nothing too controversial in such a stance. The problem here is that Versluis does not really define what he means by Platonic mysticism, except as adherence to apophatic and kataphatic modes of discourse and cognition (4–8) and as ‘nondual’ cognition, discussed further below. He tells us that ‘Platonism is best understood as a conceptual map for understanding contemplative ascent and illumination,’ (5), but does not really tell us what is on the map. So, while a case can be made for constructing a long and convoluted tradition of Platonic ideas here, in the mode of the history of ideas or of discursive genealogy, Versluis does not do this.

Intriguingly, but problematically, it is unclear how historical this ‘lineage’ is meant to be; Versluis’ brings in his concept of ‘ahistorical continuity’ to describe cases like Eckhart, whom he understandably wants to include in his tradition, but for whom we have little evidence of having had access to the authors Versluis takes as canonical. (17) Such a principle makes it possible to

trace any tradition one wishes anywhere in history: if, say, I am looking for ‘nondual cognition,’ I can choose the thinkers of my choice whom I think exhibit this, and then call these thinkers ‘the Platonic mystical tradition.’ But in doing so, what have I made clear about the Platonic tradition alleged to be the key to understanding mysticism? There is not much of use here for more prosaic historians interested in the ways in which ideas are mundanely transmitted - for example, through books and conversations.

Fundamentally, those seeking in this book a historical study of Platonic thought and its transmission will be disappointed. Such historical exposition as the book does contain, particularly in the first chapter, is marred by errors of detail and broader concerns surrounding methodology. Wholly- or partly -incorrect etymologies for words derived from Greek and Latin abound. (3, 4, 5, 14, 28, 118) There is a certain methodological sloppiness regarding ancient materials, and sometimes a lack of fundamental knowledge about the authors in question: the author known as the Pseudo-Dionysius, for example, whom Versluis rightly considers an important transmitter of Platonist ideas and metaphysics to later Christian traditions, is in one place possibly a famous pagan Platonist intellectual writing as a Christian because he recognises that the time of pagan ascendancy is past (3–4), and elsewhere ‘incontrovertibly Christian.’ (14) Versluis cites as evidence for Plotinian mysticism a letter from Plotinus to a certain Flaccus (56); this ‘Plotinian epistle’ is in fact a nineteenth-century *jeu d’esprit* by an English author, which was never intended to be read as historically authentic. Elementary knowledge of the source material is lacking here. Even if we are to take the Platonic tradition being outlined in Chapter One as notional, or perhaps archetypal in the sense of Henry Corbin’s imaginal reality, or simply as a series of interesting convergences of thought with no concrete connections being posited at all (although if this is the case it is difficult to see how it can be called a ‘tradition’), we cannot interpret Plotinus based on nineteenth-century *pastiche*.

2) In defining ‘mysticism’ as ‘religious experiences corresponding to the direct cognition of a transcendent reality beyond the division of subject and object,’ (3) a formulation which he elsewhere refers to by the terms ‘nonduality’ and ‘nondualistic’ (e.g. 97), Versluis takes several stands on the issue of what mysticism might refer to: against many currently fashionable approaches, he asserts that there may indeed be primary truths about reality which can be directly apprehended, transcending linguistic and cultural conditioning, and that such experiences are what mysticism is all about (specifics are cited below

under heading 3). The bald assertion of this case throughout the book does not however make enough of an attempt to justify the claim; whilst solid arguments are brought to bear against the often dogmatic assertions of some scholars that there are no cognitions unconditioned by language, and Versluis rightly notes that such positions risk falling into self-contradiction (again, see below), little positive argumentation is given to persuade the reader that this model of mysticism in fact reflects reality, or is the best possible model. One is left with the feeling that Versluis is preaching to the converted, and relatively uninterested in converting the materialists or other skeptics, or even other scholars of mysticism who might share his criticisms of constructivist approaches, to his way of thinking. I think this is a pity.

A further objection to this formulation is Versluis' particular characterisation of it as Platonic. As it happens, I find many of his readings of Platonist authors convincing: Plotinus, in particular, can be read as fitting well into Versluis' scheme, and the Plotinian union with the One is 'nondual' if ever anything was nondual. Versluis' approach to Plotinus' text as performative is particularly insightful: 'But the discursive exposition of a Plotinus...is not an end in itself; it is rather at the service of the contemplative ascent and transcendence.' This strikes me as a sound interpretive posture, based as it can be on Plotinus' own programmatic statements and the general tenor of his work. However, one sees from time to time a strong tendency to make the Platonism fit the definition rather than to craft the definition to explain Platonism, as when Versluis equates Buddhist ideas with Platonic ideas, (109–12) arguing that the two traditions' 'core descriptions are so akin.' (112) Are they? One danger of the leveling, 'experiential' approach to mysticism, as has often been noted, is that of equating traditions by erasing or ignoring inconvenient contradictions.

Page 107 provides an egregious case in point: Versluis thinks that mysticism is by definition a 'nondual' state of cognition, and so takes issue with Robert K.C. Forman, who refers to a 'dualistic mystical state,' and Jeffrey Kripal, who refers to a 'doubled mode of consciousness.' Versluis objects that, 'Both of these scholars are strongly influenced by Hinduism and in particular the idea of the transcendent Self or Atman that is ultimately identical to Brahman. But Platonic tradition is closer to Mahayana or Vajrayana Buddhism and does not privilege a separate "witness" consciousness.' Versluis does not tell us why this similarity between Buddhism and Platonism is so obvious and, on the face of it, this is a bizarre statement: if any metaphysical idea can be seen as a constant of Platonism down the ages, it is surely that there is a soul which is a locus of the human self that is eternal, is possessed of being and essence, and

is a substance in the classical sense — everything, in fact, which the Buddhist doctrine of *anatma* tells us that the human self is *not*. The Platonic soul is in fact loosely cognate with some ideas of Brahman expounded in vedanta; Versluis could not have chosen a worse example for his argument.

If Versluis thinks that this obvious metaphysical contradiction between Buddhism and Platonic thought is in fact no obstacle to equating the two traditions, he must at least explain why he thinks so; a bald assertion such as this is not good enough. There is a trick played here, as well: the Hindu influence which Versluis claims is influencing the two scholars with whom he disagrees is expressed as an ontological belief — Hinduism believes in the *existence* of a Self. The Platonic tradition, according to Versluis, does not privilege a “witness” *consciousness*’ — that is, we have shifted from ontology to epistemology, where Versluis is perhaps on firmer ground. But unfortunately, the fact that Platonism in all its forms has perhaps the most robust *ontological* claims for the ‘self’ of any world tradition will not simply vanish, and Versluis should not sidestep it in his attempts to make Platonism fit his definition of mysticism and line up with Buddhism. If Buddhists and Platonists fundamentally disagree on points of metaphysics (and they undoubtedly do), this fact must be addressed and dealt with.

3) In Chapters Two and Three, Versluis surveys modern (from the nineteenth century onward) theories about mysticism. He roughly sketches out various theories and typologies for mysticism which arose around the turn of the twentieth century, noting that an emphasis on the Platonic tradition, and particularly on Plotinus, was common in many interpretive frameworks in this period. He then charts what he sees as the downfall of this approach from the mid-twentieth century until the present, partly arising from the ‘psychologization’ of mysticism, and partly from the rise of materialist and deconstructionist attitudes. The result has been, according to Versluis, a move away from a valid model of mysticism toward a useless and doomed externalist approach, two effects of which he sums up at the end of Chapter Two (51) as follows: Firstly, the central importance of Platonism ‘becomes largely overlooked in favor of pan-traditional approaches centered on individual psychological experiences.’ Secondly, ‘the importance of Platonic metaphysics is eclipsed.’

These statements represent a low point for Versluis’ book. As we have seen, Versluis himself dabbles in at least trans-traditionalism if not outright pan-traditionalism, equating Buddhist and Platonic approaches. His understanding of mysticism as essentially a cognitive state is surely the most

‘psychologized’ possible definition. And, unfortunately, while showing a sensitive appreciation for the forms of apophatic writing found in the Platonist tradition (see below), he either does not himself understand Platonist metaphysics very well, or needs to argue much more strongly to convince us that they are indeed the rather Buddhistic, consciousness-based metaphysics he seems to think they are, and that their ontological content, which he largely ignores, is not really important.

Versluis depicts the eclipse of Platonic mysticism in modern scholarship in a polemical, almost conspiratorial way, describing it as a ‘malign’ and deliberate act of exclusion by scholars ‘seeking to excommunicate those who study and take seriously the category “mysticism”.’ (72) Many of these scholars are of course seeking to take seriously the category of mysticism – they simply disagree with Versluis as to what mysticism might mean. While they may be wrong, they are perhaps not all ‘malign.’ Versluis’ criticisms of other scholars occasionally even borders on the personal; interested parties can consult the book. Versluis finds (anecdotally) that hardly anyone studies Plotinus nowadays (71); as a Plotinian specialist, my (anecdotal) suspicion is that more people are studying Plotinus nowadays than at any time since antiquity. Versluis finds that the field of Western esotericism studies almost completely excludes mysticism (75); taking the Brill *Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism* as a case study, we find both an article devoted to the subject of mysticism and hundreds of references to the subject in other articles. This is admittedly not a survey of the field as a whole, but makes one feel, again anecdotally, that we cannot be looking at ‘almost complete’ exclusion.

I am, however, doing Versluis a disservice by ignoring the word ‘individual’ in his criticism of ‘pan-traditional approaches centered on individual psychological experiences,’ and here he has a very good point. In Chapter Four he does excellent justice to one question of Platonist metaphysics, the question of whether or not the interior world explored by the mystic is utterly subjective (most modern interpreters) or instead a shared realm of some kind, which all humans can potentially visit, and which can, *a priori*, be said to contain truth (Plato and all Platonists). Here Versluis musters some impressive arguments against the commonplace academic assumption that the inner life of human beings must have no common ground in truth, arguing, in effect, that some form of Platonist realism should at least be considered as a possibility. Many arguments he brings forward are convincing or at least thought provoking (although the tone is often polemical to a degree which can be distracting) and he is particularly effective, I feel, in pointing out the *ex cathedra* nature of many

pronouncements of materialist and constructivist scholars (e.g. 62–63, and throughout Chapter Four). Versluis does a salutary job of arguing briefly but effectively in Chapter Four and elsewhere that the question of consciousness is indeed far from closed, and that materialists, constructivists, and others who assume that it is often make sweeping statements from flimsy or self-contradictory premises.

4–5) We can consider what I take to be the two final main points of Versluis' book in tandem. These are that understanding Platonic metaphysics is an essential tool for understanding the mystical literature in that tradition, and that taking a reductionistic materialist or similar perspective makes it impossible fully to understand this literature. These ideas are adumbrated throughout the book, but expounded especially in Chapter Four, which, as we have seen, contains many arguments against what Versluis calls the 'externalist fallacy,' and in Chapters Five and Six, entitled 'On Literature and Mysticism' and 'Transcendence,' respectively. Here Versluis is on his home ground, and his interpretive stance comes into its own in this latter part of the book.

The basic idea that understanding Platonic metaphysics is essential to understanding mystical literature of a Platonic stamp should strike no one as either new or surprising. But Versluis is taking several further positions here. He is arguing for a form of Platonist realism, as already mentioned. He is arguing for an insider, 'emic' approach to mystical literature. He is also assuming, rather than arguing, that his understanding of Platonic metaphysics is the correct one. This final assumption is the main flaw of these latter chapters, as well as of the book as a whole, because Versluis does not simply mean, by 'Platonic metaphysics,' the realism alluded to earlier; he also means 'direct cognition of a transcendent reality beyond the division of subject and object,' i.e., his definition of mysticism, with little or no reference to that troublesome Platonist ontology, or indeed much else from the vast and rich realm of Platonist ideas about metaphysics. Again, I feel that such a position *could be* an insightful and interesting approach to Platonic ideas, and particularly to Plotinus, but it requires argumentation which this book does not attempt.

Where the book does approach questions of metaphysics beyond the bare question of philosophic realism, it stumbles and sometimes falls down entirely, especially when ironing out the real differences in the theories of different historical Platonists. Versluis argues that in Platonic mysticism the subjective consciousness of the individual self and the One are both ultimately the same; that is, they are both *nous*. (90) Such a statement might conceivably apply to Alcinoüs or other middle Platonists, but it is utterly wrong in the

Plotinian context; Plotinus' *nous* mediates between the One and the soul, but the One can on no interpretation be reduced to the *nous*. This is a fairly specific point, but if we are confidently to discuss the metaphysics of a given tradition, it is essential that we get the basics right. On page 89 Versluis has the Pseudo-Dionysius speaking of the 'transcendent One'; Dionysius in fact speaks of 'God.' If we are to cast aside the theistic character of Dionysius' writing, we must at least note that we are doing so, without smuggling in terms from philosophic Platonism which are not found in our author's text. Pages 22–23 discuss the Cambridge Platonists, including them in the Platonic tradition being constructed with no reference to the importance to their thought of Origen, who is conspicuously absent from Versluis' Platonic tradition; this is to misconstrue what the Cambridge thinkers were doing. Anyone who is claiming that Platonic metaphysics are an essential key for understanding mystical literature had better understand Platonic metaphysics and treat them with care. The point of listing these specific examples is to show that while Versluis asserts that he does so, he nowhere demonstrates this.

Turning to the arguments for an insider approach to mystical literature, Versluis makes his points much better, and in a timely fashion. He is taking a side against what he calls the 'externalist' approach, arguing in effect for a participatory reading of mystical literature by students of these matters. He argues that the academic study of esotericism could benefit from absorbing the insights and methodologies of participant observation or the 'insider approach,' which are highly developed, well-worn ground in the field of anthropology. (77–80) This is an excellent suggestion, and, happily, this approach *is* in fact rapidly growing in the field of Western esotericism studies (although perhaps not specifically in the study of mysticism). However, Versluis is not only arguing that these academic approaches from anthropology would benefit the study of Western esotericism; he is also arguing that the 'externalist' approach to mystical materials, the bracketing of all inner experiences and insights as essentially beyond the reach of humanistic scholarship, means that such scholarship will never fully understand mysticism (e.g. 77–84). He points out the role that influences such as the pressures of 'academic respectability' can play in narrowing the scope of what is seen as legitimate material for interpreting mysticism. (81–82) Although he speaks circumspectly on this point, one is left in little doubt that Versluis is making the age-old claim that 'only a mystic can understand mysticism' – the programmatic statements on page 82 make this especially clear – which is fine, but of course could be seen to make the publication of his own book self-referentially pointless: those who know will

already know, while those who do not know will never be able to learn from an external account, including, one would assume, Versluis'. However, he finds a way out of this impasse, and in a very interesting way.

Versluis argues for a kind of hermeneutical entry into mystical literature, and particularly into apophatic literature, a 'metaphysics of literature' in fact, allowing the text to fulfill its intended purpose, i.e., to point in the direction of its unsayable 'referent.' I find the discussion of performative apophatic text here (esp. 89–92) to be particularly insightful: we are unlikely to find a better description of apophatic literature than 'a literature whose primary, one may even say sole, purpose is to make itself transparent as it explicitly points toward its own transcendence and the transcendence of all linguistic constructions' (92). Versluis' discussion shows a great sympathy with this genre of writing, and even materialists, or others who do not believe in the transcendent goal to which this type of literature points, might agree that apophatic writers are trying to achieve something like what Versluis outlines in Chapter Five. Thus, if Versluis is claiming that the only people who can appreciate Platonic mystical writing at all are mystics, the claim seems overblown. If he is perhaps arguing that an at least somewhat emic approach is needed which temporarily suspends judgment for the purposes of interpretation, he of course has a point, even if the point raises its own problems.

Versluis' discussion of mystical literature does not confine itself to the strictly apophatic; he is also interested in works of a more 'visionary' character by writers like Blake, Colquhoun, Rilke, Yeats, and others. (97–103) Here the 'Platonic' nature of the texts becomes more tenuous, as Versluis himself is aware (e.g. 101, with regard to Colquhoun), but the inclusion of these authors in the book, though tangential, is welcome. Insofar as he has successfully constructed a tradition of Platonic mysticism, these and other works discussed do not fit into it very easily, and one wishes not that Versluis would abandon his fascinating treatment of these authors, but instead refine his typology of Platonic mysticism so as better to fit the facts.

An overarching problem with this book is circularity of definitions. As discussed, Versluis defines mysticism precisely as 'religious experiences corresponding to the direct cognition of a transcendent reality beyond the division of subject and object.' This mysticism is then given as the definition of what it is to be Platonic. And Platonic mysticism is the key to understanding all mysticism: 'For our purposes, Platonism and mysticism are different terms for the same thing' (8). Versluis berates authors writing on mysticism for neglect-

ing Platonic mysticism, as he has constructed it, but nowhere has he actually made a serious attempt to argue *why* we should take mysticism to mean what he says it means, nor why we should take this also to be the essence of *Platonic* mysticism specifically, nor, finally, why we should take the Platonic tradition (if it is a tradition) to be in essence a *philosophia perennis*. This is disappointing, in that Versluis has an intriguing working definition for ‘mysticism’ which *could* further interesting discussions about Platonist authors; Versluis’ approach seems particularly apt in the case of Plotinus. But Versluis is not using his model of mysticism as a heuristic tool; he is using it as an essential definition, which he berates other authors for not sharing.

I feel that Versluis has not earned the right to do this, because he has not argued for his definition in the first place. He simply asserts that Western mysticism = Platonic mysticism = ‘nondual cognition.’ This is a disappointment, as it limits the appeal of this book, to some degree, to those who already agree with its author, and makes little convincing effort to engage others who might have questions or reservations about his conclusions. As it happens, I feel that Versluis is on to something both in his emphasis on the importance of Platonism (writ broadly) in the history of Western mystical thought, and in his insight that in Platonism (or at least in Plotinus) the proper field of investigation is consciousness. The lack of argumentation in this book is thus especially frustrating not because the claims put forward are flimsy, but precisely because they are so intriguing, and we wish the author would do them justice by making his case properly. I would by no means demand that he do so in a more ‘externalist’ or ‘anti-essentialist’ way, but I would like to see more explanatory power in his model of mysticism, and less eclecticism in his selection of facts when building that model.

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Stephen C. Finley, Margarita Simon Guillory, & Hugh R. Page Jr., (eds.). *Esotericism in African American Religious Experience: "There is a Mystery"...* Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2014. xxi + 406 p. ISBN: 978-90-04-28342-8. €148 / \$193.

The history of Western esotericism has tended to be the history of dead white people. This is not due to explicit racist discrimination; it is rather a consequence of the fact that the concept of the “West”, an often complex and fluid cultural and geographical term, has historically been built around “whiteness” as the norm for what should be included. The contributions of people of color to the history of esotericism, along with their particular historical experiences, have for that reason often been neglected when researching cultural milieus that are almost always seen as “Western”, like North America. For this reason alone, the anthology *Esotericism in African American Religious Experience* is an important and welcome addition to the study of Western esotericism.

The volume is edited by Stephen C. Finley, Margarita Simon Guillory and Hugh R. Page Jr, all scholars who have done extensive work in the study of African-American culture and religion. The contributors offer a variety of theoretical perspectives, from the mostly descriptive to Lacanian analyses, giving the work a multidisciplinary impression. The book is in many ways exploratory, mapping out a new field of study and working to locate African-American religious experience in terms of esotericism. If African-American experiences have tended to be neglected in the study of Western esotericism, a similar situation has been the case in academic studies of African-American culture and religion, where esotericism’s role has often been neglected. One example is lack of interest in the role of Prince Hall Freemasonry in the development of a black middle class; another is esotericism’s central presence in some of the most significant cultural movements within the African-American community, most notably the Harlem Renaissance and later the development of Afrocentrism. As the editors of the work explain in their introductory essay, this lack of interest seems to be because of two primary factors, one the above-mentioned inherent racial dimension of the term “Western”, and the second the search for respectability within the study of African-American culture, resulting in a focus on the role of Christianity in African-American religion rather than more heterodox movements.

In terms of the first problem, it is hard not to agree with this critique of the use of the term “Western”. We tend to regard North America as part of the West, often connecting it to the migration of people defined as white. Of

course, “whiteness” is in itself a shifting category that has never had any clear definition. Some ethnic identities that today are regarded as “white”, like Italian or Irish, have been included in the category quite recently. While this review is not about the concept of Western or whiteness it is necessary to remember this background. Despite being a part of the geographical West for hundreds of years, African-Americans have in large part been neglected in the study of Western esotericism, and as a counterpoint esotericism has often been neglected in the study of African-American culture. This leads to the second problem. As the editors present the case in the introduction, Africana studies have often seen Christianity as the norm. The “African gods” did not, in this line of reasoning, survive the crossing of the Atlantic to North America.

In order to encompass the vast phenomenon of esotericism in African-American culture the editors use the term “Africana Esoteric Studies”. With “Africana” the editors refer to the experience of being African, with a focus on diaspora communities. As such the term usually refers to the racial construction of blackness rather than discussions about Pan-Africanism that can be found among African writers, where Africana usually refers to attempts to find commonality among people living in Africa, which can include people of European descent. In America, however, the term African is clearly associated with ideas of blackness, juxtaposed with an equally racially coded notion of European. For the editors, Africana esotericism is a rather essentialist phenomenon that is found in African-American religion, including mysticism and Gnosticism, a direct experience of the Divine, as a central component of not only Africana esoteric movements but of African-American and American religion as a whole. This means that esotericism, far from being a fringe phenomenon, is instead presented as the hidden core of African-American religious experience. Problematically, however, while there is a need for a term that will address the specific historical and cultural experience of African-American people and how this affects their view and interpretation of esoteric traditions, the term tends to become too static and essentialist, disregarding the often contested meanings that the terms “esotericism” and “African” have had within esoteric and African-American traditions. For example, both the African continent itself and Ancient Egypt have been used as positive references within African-American culture, but also as the opposite, with Africa functioning as a symbol of primitivism and Egypt of slavery. Hopefully in the future a more nuanced definition of Africana esoteric traditions can develop from these early attempts to define the field, taking account of the complexity of these traditions.

Apart from the introduction, the book consists of twenty articles that cover the history of Africana esotericism in a roughly chronological way, beginning

with the nineteenth century and earlier currents. Here we find articles on Vodou, Paschal Beverly Randolph and New Thought within African-American communities. While Randolph is often presented as central to the development of modern Western esotericism, the chapter by Lana Finley focuses instead on Randolph's role in the African-American community. The second part of the book deals with early to mid-twentieth-century currents. The range of topics is wide, from folk magic and conjuring traditions to new religious movements like the Five Percenters, Nuwabians, and the Nation of Islam. In the case of the latter, Stephen C. Finley goes through the central role that numerology played for key writers of the movement and Justine M. Bakker looks at the role of concealment and revelation. While there have been a number of studies on the Nation of Islam, the movement and central figures like Elijah Muhammad and Louis Farrakhan, have rarely been discussed as representatives of an esoteric tradition, despite the prominence of such themes in their writings. This makes Finley's and Bakker's contributions valuable not only to the study of Western esotericism, but to scholarship on the Nation of Islam. Part Two of the book also deals with spiritualist churches and cultural movements like the Harlem Renaissance, perhaps the most famous and well-covered esoteric movement in African-American culture. Jon Woodson's chapter on this gives a clear introduction to how this tradition was developed, the role of Gurdjieff and his disciple A.R. Orage, and how this heritage was developed by Jean Toomer. With the Harlem Renaissance we are clearly dealing with a cultural and literary movement where esotericism was a prominent feature and it would be interesting for future studies to further explore its impact on the Black Power movement of the 1970s.

The third part deals with the late twentieth century until today and also includes more chapters that deal with the impact of esotericism in African-American pop culture, as in the case of Sun Ra. Today Sun Ra is more integrated in the broader field of Western esotericism and was included in the exhibition "Black Light: Secret Traditions in Art since the 1950s", an exhibition on art and the occult which took place in Barcelona 2018, also featuring work by artists and writers like Aleister Crowley, Cameron Parsons, and Genesis P. Orridge. Marques Redd, who writes about Sun Ra, also has a chapter on Ishmael Reed's modernist classic, *Mumbo Jumbo*, a novel filled with references to both esotericism and African diaspora religions. Redd shows that these themes were central to Reed's often ironic writings: Reed created an alternative history that included Iwa (the spirits of Vodou), ancient conflicts between Egyptian gods, and an order of Knights Templar. The story centers on the force or virus known as the "Jes Grew", a threat

to social order and monotheism, promising freedom, ecstasy and polytheism, manifested as jazz music and ragtime. The term Jes Grew was invented by Reed to create associations with jazz, and cast as a threat to white hegemony. Reed's novel is of course a reference to social changes and the fear of white society that their own young would become influenced by black culture, but, as Redd shows, the esoteric aspects of his work are a key to understanding the meaning of it all.

Esotericism in African American Religious Experience is a pioneering work that seeks to map out a new territory. While some of the topics that are included have been written about before in relation to esotericism, like the Harlem Renaissance, Randolph, and Vodou, there is no doubt that the impact esoteric traditions have had on African-American culture is greater than many understand. It is regrettable that this impact has been neglected in studies on both Western esotericism and African-American culture, and for this reason alone the book is one of the most important works on Western esotericism published in recent years. But as a pioneering work there are also several white spots that remain to be mapped. For example, I was surprised not to see a chapter on Prince Hall Freemasonry or Afrocentricity, especially since there are direct connections to early Afrocentric writers like George G.M. James, author of *Stolen Legacy* (1954), who based his understanding of history on Rosicrucianism. Also, while the role of esotericism in the Nation of Islam is addressed, the esoteric aspects of other Black nationalist movements like Maulana Karenga's US movement are absent. As a new field it is to be expected that all cannot be included, and the field of Africana Esoteric Studies is hardly exhausted after this volume. While the chapters are somewhat uneven and the definition of Africana Esoteric Studies a bit essentialist the work is still of significant value as it points to a new area of research on Western esotericism that will only enrich the field. Hopefully the volume will inspire more academics from the field of Africana studies to engage more actively with the study of esotericism. And hopefully it will also lead those in the field of Western esotericism to become more engaged with Africana studies, creating a more open and critical discussion on the problems associated with the racialized legacy of the term Western, discussing how to move forward without forgetting the past that has shaped both fields, and identifying how so-called European-based and African-based esoteric movements have integrated and mixed with each other, creating the cultural hybrid that has become "Western" and even more so American esotericism.

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